Sankagetsu Den: Tenmei Ga Umareta Toki

VraieEsprit

Fushigi Yuugi

Complete

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Sankagetsu Den: Tenmei Ga Umareta Toki

VraieEsprit

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This story was first published on April 23rd, 2008, and was last updated on October 17th, 2008.

FicLab ID: _XeYakWr/m4g68ym8/10700E581

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Summary

title	Sankagetsu Den: Tenmei Ga Umareta Toki
author	VraieEsprit
source	https://www.fanfiction.net/s/4214392/
published	April 23rd, 2008
updated	October 17th, 2008
words	91,756
chapters	16
status	Complete
rating	Fiction T
tags	Adventure, Anime/Manga, Chichiri, Complete, Fanfiction, Fantasy, Fushigi Yuugi, Tasuki

Description

Set in the three months when Miaka first goes back to her own world. Kutou's pressure on Kounan is increasing, whilst Genrou finds himself torn between his Kashira and his family and Hou Jun heads East to try and put his new-found gifts to good use...

Chapter 1

Introduction and Disclaimer

I began writing this a long time ago — before I wrote Shichikon Den, in fact, though when the idea for Shichikon Den hit me I got distracted in a way my brain has a habit of doing (unforgivably!).

This story is set in the three months that Miaka is back in her own world. Of course, for Miaka, it's a matter of hours. But don't you wonder what might have happened back in the ShijinTenchishou in her absence?

A few caveats. **Firstly**, obviously, I don't own Fushigi Yuugi. Watase Yuu does. That's a pretty big one. And some of the characters in this story may be co-copyrighted to Nishizaki Megumi since she wrote the Gaiden novels.

Secondly — Tasuki's family appear in this story. Now, anyone who's read Shichikon Den will know that I write Aidou as the eldest sister, although her age is never given. I used her simply because she's the sister most people are aware of, having appeared in both Genrouden and the manga. In fact, as far as I can tell none of the other sisters were even given names or age positions until 2005, so I think artistic license is allowed on this point, right…? (Well, even if it isn't, it's tough).

In official canon, Aidou is the sister next to Tasuki in age — which in honesty I'd suspected she was anyway, since she was still at home and not married off yet. But for fanfic continuity purposes, I'm going to continue to write her as the eldest Kou child. Because I like Aidou. And I like her being the bossiest of the tribe :) (And her Kanji is easier to write and remember.) *(I'm also aware that in Shichikon Den I accidentally lost a sister because for some reason I was convinced Tasuki was the youngest of five not the youngest of six. My bad. Whoops. That error is corrected in this story.)*.

Tasuki's sisters are ***Eimin, Rin'an, Fuyou, Manka*** and ***Aidou***. I'm not going to attempt to write about all of them, but given the fact that I've made Aidou the eldest in my writing, you can shuffle the others all down the line one space. Rin'an and Manka are probably going to be the only other sisters to appear in this story in any case. What's happened to Eimin and Fuyou I don't know… I just really don't like their names :P

On the same point, Tasuki's family's opinion on the stellar mark is never really shown — aside from thanking Miaka and co for taking care of him in the manga, they don't get enough air-time to really have an obvious point of view. So I've worked on the same basic premise as I did in Shichikon Den — it will become clear as the story goes on what I mean. :)

Thirdly: This story brings in several of the Seishi even though Miaka has only met three of them at this point. For this reason, there may be slight conflicts with the Gaiden although I've done my best not to. Chichiri's cuts pretty close to his entrance to the story, but you can assume that what I've written slots in between sections in the last chapter of Shouryuu Den. I think the bulk of the story may focus on Tasuki, however, and his "journey" to find a cure for Hakurou (former bandit leader)'s fever. I don't know yet whether Mitsukake or Chiriko will feature as the last Seishi "found". They may have cameos, but they may not. I guess we'll see…

Fourthly: Whatever he is wearing, Nuriko is referred to as 'he' throughout this story. He also may use the name Kourin, but he is still 'he'. Even though I believe he's spiritually 'she', for this story, that works better :) Equally, though Chichiri decides to live as Chichiri at the end of Shouryuu Den, because he hasn't yet met up with the other Seishi I'm referencing him as Hou Jun. Equally Tasuki is referenced as Genrou for the same reason.

Fifthly — since I've plotted this on the same timeline as Shichikon Den and the Shinzahou Chronicles to save my own confusion, I may have cameo roles for a couple of characters which are referenced in Hikari's adventures. I dont know yet if it will or won't happen, but I think it's likely that the members of the Kaiga family may have a very brief role to play in my writing. I also wanted to write Nakago since I gasp never have done yet… which meant that going to Kutou was a certainty .

Finally : This is only a "what might have happened" story. There are a lot of things that could've gone on while Miaka was back home… this is just one possible interpretation. It also can't possibly catalogue everything over three months so, for a variety of reasons, the emphasis has fallen mostly on Chichiri and Tasuki. Remember I'm a Nuriko fan before you brand me ;) It just worked out that way!!

Ok, with all that boring rubbish said — on with the show :)

三ヶ月伝： 天命が生まれた時
Sankagetsu Den: Tenmei Ga Umareta Toki

Synopsis

Miaka has gone back to her own world and back in Kounan-koku things are becoming more and more complicated. Trade from the East is all but cut off as Hotohori faces the very real possibility of war on the horizon. Tamahome realises that his feelings for Miaka are greater than he had realised, but he is torn between waiting for her return and the responsibility he has to help his family. As for Nuriko, with his true gender now common knowledge, he knows that he has a battle of his own to face.

Meanwhile, Taiitsukun's protege, the monk from the north has finished his training and, with Suzaku no Miko absent from the ShijinTenchishou he decides to put his spiritual powers to the test in an attempt to do what he can to protect his country. And in the village shadowed by the wolf's peak Reikaku-zan, dark-clad figures have appeared asking all kinds of difficult questions. For the young bandit Genrou, his desire to help his Kashira's fever is waylaid by a need to protect his family from harm — but will he ever accept his destiny as Tasuki?

Prologue: Reikaku-zan

It was a clear, crisp night, and the moon was already high in the sky as an owl hooted mournfully, spreading its wings as it launched itself in search of prey. In the security of the darkness, colonies of bats awoke from their slumbers in mountain caves, calling to one another in their strange, secret language as they flitted from perch to perch.

In the silence, a lone figure made his way carefully down the mountain path, hands in pockets as he cast a pensive glance up at the sky overhead.

"The boss reckons you can find your way anywhere by knowin' the tracks and the sky, and tonight's as good a night as any for it." He mused to himself, one eye peeled for trouble or company as he leapt neatly down over an uneven pile of rocks in his way. "So I guess we'll see, won't we? Findin' a cure for some simple fever has to be easy, right? There are doctors even in my village who might be able to help. I'll be gone a matter of a day or two, that's all — and when the boss is recovered, everything will go back to normal on Reikaku-zan. Everything."

He frowned, an uncharacteristically pensive look flitting across his young face as he reached the unspoken boundary between the bandits' mountain track and the roadway down to the villages below. Though he made light of it, even he, with all his youth and inexperience had known that his leader's ailment was more than a simple fever.

"And I ain't gonna sit around like a fool waitin' for him to die of it,

when there's somethin' I can be doin' about it." He muttered, resolution in his eyes. "With my speed, it won't be more than a brief trip out, and I don't know why they were all makin' such a fuss. I told them already — Genrou ain't leaving Reikaku-zan, not ever. This is just an errand, that's all. I'll be right back — all they gotta do is hold on and wait for me. That's all. I ain't gonna let them down. Especially considerin'…what the Kashira said."

Memory of the conversation drifted through his thoughts and he smiled, his expression becoming wolfish in the pale moonlight.

"I'll be the next kashira, but that ain't gonna be yet." He decided. "Right now, I'm gonna fix up the old one and get things back flowin' on the mountain. It's all been too mixed up… but as soon as I find a cure, everythin' will get back to normal."

The night held no fear for him, for he was no stranger to the forests and hills in darkness. Barely seventeen years old, he had ingratiated himself with the mountain bandits of Reikaku-zan a year and a bit before, and had determinedly progressed in both training and resolution to be the best bandit a man could ever be. They had become his family, and everything important to him, and though he wouldn't say it face to face, the leader whose life he sought to preserve had become more like both a father and an older brother to him in the time he had been on the mountainside.

"So they'll just have to hang on in there, and I'll be right back." He said firmly, leaping down over a trickle of a stream as he landed on the bank opposite. "By dawn I'll be in Souun, and then I can find some food and ask about cures. I might even be back by this time tomorrow — surely there must be someone who knows what to do for a man burnin' up a fever."

He scrambled down the last of the rocks and dips, pausing for a moment to cast a glance out across the landscape of Kounan's west country, lit up as it was by the light of a near-full moon. This was the best place, he knew, to see the land over which Reikaku-zan had always claimed sway, and as he looked to the East he was aware of the dark shadow of Kaou-zan casting it's gloom over the furthermost corners of the ground. The rivalry between bandit peaks had always been strong, and absently Genrou hoped that the unscrupulous rival gang would not choose to invade his mountain home whilst Hakurou was so incapacitated by illness.

"It ain't like him." At length Genrou voiced the fear that had nagged away at him since the first moment he had realised Hakurou was unwell. "To be weak… to be like that. So I gotta save him. I gotta

find a way — whatever that way is. There must be someone in this damn country who can help, an' I ain't goin' to give up till I find them. Even if it's not in Souun, I'll track them down. Some doctor, some healer, some herbal expert will know a cure. There has to be one, after all. All sicknesses have cures — right? This is just one of those things… an' I'll make sure it's all fixed up all right."

His gaze fell briefly on the shadowy cluster of houses that made up his own village, and a wry smile touched his lips. His sisters would be horrified, he knew, if they realised that their younger brother was standing over them, staring down on the place of his birth. Yet despite that, he had no inclination to return there. His childhood surrounded by the mischievous, domineering and demanding women of the Kou family had taught him very quickly that girls were nothing but trouble, and as a result, he was resolved to have nothing more to do with any of them — blood kin or not.

But where should he begin his search? Deep in his heart he knew that Hakurou's illness was not like normal illness, and that it was unlikely the few physicians Souun had to offer would know anything about the Kashira's odd symptoms. But if not there, then where? That was the key question.

Genrou sighed, dropping down onto the soft grass as he leant back on his hands, gazing up at the stars that glittered brightly over his head. Kounan was not a big country, in relation to its neighbours, but at that moment it seemed immense to the young bandit as he tried to work out his best course of action. As he did so, the twinkling constellations caught his eye, and he pursed his lips, a faint flicker of resentment stirring within him as he remembered what else Hakurou had said.

"Leave the mountain and follow Suzaku, huh?" He murmured. "Like hell. I'm Genrou of Reikaku-zan an' that's where I'm goin' to stay. I don't belong with any Miko or any divine God's will. I'm goin' to hold the tessen an' be Hakurou-kashira's successor one day. I ain't got time to run around after some stupid other-world girl an' her whims."

He frowned, his gaze going absently to the morass of stars that made up the constellation Tasuki. Despite his feigned disinterest, he had learnt at a young age which stars were which and, although he claimed to use that knowledge now only as tools in night travel navigation, he knew that there was some greater connection between him and them that he could not put into words. If he was truly honest with himself, he knew that the biggest reason he had left Reikaku-zan

in search of a cure was to prove once and for all who he truly was. Not just to his Kashira, but most of all to himself.

As he sat there, ignoring the faint calls of the hunting night birds as they scoured the land for prey, he felt a faint buzzing sensation begin to spread across his arm and he cursed, glancing down at his offending limb as he registered the reason for the sudden sensation. In the blackness of the night, the blood red glow of the character '*tsubasa*' against his sun-tanned skin seemed twice as vivid as usual, and he bit his lip, clamping his left hand over it as he sought to conceal it from view. Crimson light flooded out around the edges of his fingers, however, and at length he gave up, flopping back on the grass as he spread his arms out around him.

It had got stronger, lately.

When it had first appeared, it had been indistinct and intermittent, and his family had always excused it to neighbours as a birthmark or a rash. Now, however, it was beyond all doubt the mark of a Celestial Warrior, and despite himself, Genrou could almost hear his mother's words ringing in his ears.

"*What the hell use are you as Suzaku's sacrifice if you can't weed crops properly or cut wood for the fire when we need it*?"

The woman's sharp, mountain-tinged tones flooded his brain and he groaned, closing his eyes.

"Suzaku's sacrifice." He murmured. "Shit. At this rate I'm gonna have'ta cover that arm up permanently, else it won't jus' be Ma bleatin' about it. All of Reikaku-zan — no, all of friggin' Kounan — if this is such a big deal, I'm gonna have to go to some lengths to hide it. After all, I don't want to be Suzaku's anything. An' if people saw it, like hell they'd leave me alone."

He opened his eyes once more, gazing resentfully up at the gathered constellations. Their brightness seemed to mock him somehow, he reflected ruefully, and it was adding insult to injury that the most dazzling of all of them was the constellation under which he had been born.

"But right now, Hakurou-kashira's more important than any divine bird or whatever." He decided, fumbling in the folds of his shirt for the abused scrap of cloth he had once called a handkerchief. Pulling himself into a sitting position, he eyed the ragged fabric for a moment, then carefully he began to rip it into shreds, clamping it between his fanged teeth as he yanked the tattered threads apart. Then, piece by piece he knotted the strips together, and, not without misgivings, he

began to bind the cloth around his right forearm, carefully obscuring the character from view.

For a moment the light seemed to blaze even through the aging fabric, then, slowly, it began to fade.

“Tomorrow I’ll do something about it properly.” He reflected, getting carefully to his feet as he flexed and tightened his fist a few times. “It feels all right, but it won’t last an’ I can’t run the risk of anyone seein’ it. Life’s complicated enough without my gettin’ wound up with some foreign wench an’ a giant bird of prey… an’ I ain’t gonna let anything get in the way of my helpin’ the Kashira get well!”

Chapter 2

Chapter One
Taikyoku-zan

Suzaku no Miko had really gone.

Nuriko settled himself in one of Taikyoku-zan's overly engulfing seats, letting out a sigh of contemplation as he rearranged his skirts more effectively over his knees. Despite the fact he had used the bulk of his life force to help send the girl home to her family, he felt a curl of regret stirring inside the depths of his heart. He had sworn to hate her, even best her as competition for the Emperor's affections. And yet, somehow, he was sad that she'd gone.

"If Miaka's not here, then Hotohori-sama can't spend all his time chasing after her." He reasoned ruefully to himself, his fingers straying absently to brush against his collarbone. Beneath the thick, muslin fabrics he knew that the sign of the willow was blazing at his thoughts, and he found himself glad that noone else could see this blatant proof of his flourishing affection for his Suzaku team-mate. "Yet even so, I'm going to miss her. Whether she comes right back or she doesn't come back at all — there's something unique about that girl. Something I never saw in anyone before. Maybe it's because she's not from this world… but somehow I'm starting to believe in her."

He sat back, folding his hands in his lap as he reflected on this thought for a moment.

"She eats too much, and doesn't think before acting. She trusts in everyone, even to the point of idiocy." He murmured softly. "So what is it, then, about Miaka-no-baka? What did Suzaku see in her? And what am *I* beginning to see in her? Another younger sister? Probably. That seems to be the cycle my life follows, after all. Who knows? Maybe she'll be the little sister I can protect, after all."

"So… you really are a… a man?"

At the sound of his companion's voice, Nuriko glanced up from his seat, casting Tamahome a coquettish smile. He shuffled up, gesturing to his fellow Seishi to sit down beside him. Tamahome hesitated for a moment, then dropped down into the empty place, still eying his new ally with an air of wary confusion.

Nuriko smirked, humour glittering in his expressive dark eyes as he

absorbed the discomfort in his friend's demeanour.

"What's the matter, Tama-chan? Don't you think it's possible for me to be quite so pretty as this, if I'm built a little differently from Miaka?" He asked lightly, amusement in his eyes. Tamahome tensed at this, turning to send him an accusatory glare.

"Nuriko, you *kissed* me, dammit!" He responded indignantly. "Full on, in public, like the most brazen hussy in the whole of Kounan! And now..what? You're just going to brush it off like it was the most normal thing in the world to do? Hell, don't you stop and think of the effect something like that might have on someone, confusing them like that?!"

Nuriko chuckled, his wicked sense of humour overtaking his earlier pensiveness as he sent Tamahome a coy smile.

"I'm sorry, Tama, but I only have eyes for his Highness." He said softly. "I only kissed you to make Miaka jealous — sorry about that."

He winked at his companion playfully.

"Don't say I broke your heart in the process, because I definitely won't believe it."

He smiled, remembering the event in question. Tamahome's shocked look, Miaka's stricken expression… Hotohori's utter confusion. It had been an impulsive act, he knew, designed to try and widen a rift between the Emperor and his chosen Miko, but despite himself he could see the funny side to it as well. He giggled, shaking his head.

"Your face was priceless." He added. "I never saw someone look so pussy-struck as that. You must have scant little experience with women, Tama-chan, if you can let a delicate thing like me take advantage of you so easily."

He tut-tutted, shaking his head.

"Perhaps you need some pointers." He reflected. "Maybe, as your oneesan, I was just giving you a little guidance. Surely the practice can't be bad for you? One day you'll find a girl stupid enough to want to marry you, after all. Then you'll thank ol' Nuriko for breaking you in gently."

"Nuriko, will you quit it already?" Tamahome clenched his fists. "Stop messing around and come clean, will you? You're a guy. You're a guy and you've been a guy all the time, right? But you lived in his Highness's harem, and you… you kissed me and… and what the hell

is wrong with your head? What kind of man dresses up like a woman and struts his stuff in make-up and silk for the world to see, huh?"

"His highness has been known to do it, on occasion." Nuriko seemed unperturbed by his companion's reaction. "He's beautiful enough to beat most of the women in that harem, anyway."

He shrugged his shoulders carelessly.

"You really are naive, Tamahome." He added reprovingly. "Love has nothing to do with someone's gender. It's how their heart works that matters — surely someone must've taught you that once upon a time? I love his Highness, and so, this seems natural to me. Doesn't it make sense to you at all? Are you really that much of a child still?"

"Are you really that perverted?" Tamahome retorted, and Nuriko frowned, stretching out a hand and tapping his fellow Seishi gently on the cheek. There was no force behind the gesture at all, but it was enough to send Tamahome sprawling backwards onto the floor.

"You shouldn't be so offensive towards a pretty young girl, Tama-chan." Nuriko said warningly, peering over the back of his own seat as he watched his friend pick himself up. "I don't need comments like that from an idiot like you, all right? After all, it's *your* fault that Miaka got a fever, and I'll bet it was your fault she wound up getting hurt this time, too. You're just thick in the head and you can't understand how a girl feels when she loves a man. That's all. If you did, you'd know that what I feel for his Highness isn't the least bit perverted. Just as what Miaka feels for you isn't, either. Now learn to speak to your elders with some respect, else I'll give you matching bruises on *all* your cheeks."

"You are one weird guy, you know that?" Tamahome stood, brushing himself down as he rubbed his jaw ruefully. "And it hurts when you do that."

"Well, you offended me." Nuriko folded his arms across his chest. "And will you stop looking at me like I'm a circus exhibit, please? I have my reasons for doing the things I do, just as I'm sure you have your reasons for being such a block-headed moron when it comes to Miaka and women in general. You have a fixation with money. I have a genuine affection for the Emperor. You're just as twisted as me, if you look at it that way. At least the thing *I'm* in love with has a soul."

Tamahome started, a flicker of anger in his eyes at this, but he quelled it, shaking his head as he sat back down.

"All right. I'm sorry." He said slowly. "But you did kiss me, and I'm

not all that happy about it, now I know who you really are. Can you blame a guy for feeling that way? Just because you have… well, those kinds of attractions — don't you think it was a bit unfair to shove me in the middle of your love games when you're obviously pretty clear that I'm in no doubt about my gender?!"

"You *do* think I'm pretty though, right Tama-chan?" Nuriko asked playfully, and Tamahome grimaced, rubbing his temples.

"I did, before I knew what you were hiding beneath your robes." He said flatly. "Give it up already, will you?"

"I'm only teasing you." Nuriko dimpled. "But it's really just like I said before. I have a woman's heart, deep down inside of me. I might be a man — biologically I can't escape the body that nature gave me. But what you look like and how you feel aren't the same thing, you know. When you grow up a bit, you'll learn that, Tamahome."

"Stop coming over me like you're so much more experienced." Tamahome bristled. "You're not that much older than me, you know, if you even are older than me at all."

Nuriko tut-tutted.

"So we're going to argue about this for the rest of our time fighting together, are we?" He asked softly. "Such a shame. I thought we'd be such good friends, too… you really are a handsome catch, too handsome for little Miaka, when it comes to the crunch."

"You're doing it again!"

"All right, all right. I'm done." Nuriko flashed him an apologetic smile. "But you have to laugh at things sometimes, you know. If you don't, you can only cry — isn't that how the saying goes? And I don't much like crying if I can do the opposite. You get the cards life deals you, after all — and this is just the way I am. If it's going to be an issue…"

He trailed off, and Tamahome sighed, shaking his head.

"I guess it's your business. Just don't kiss me again." He said wearily. "All right? I want your word that you won't… the whole thing, it's just too weird otherwise."

"Don't worry. I'm not really attracted to you, anyway." Nuriko dismissed this with a flick of his hand. "I'm not in love with his Highness because he's a man. It's because of how gentle and lonely he is — and how beautiful a person he is, beneath the Imperial title. It has nothing to do with his gender, or mine. I'm attracted to him on a

much higher level than you can understand, Tama. That's all it is. On a level only girls can really understand. And to all intents and purposes, well, I really am a girl. In all the things that count at least."

"Well, you sure look like one, and I guess you act like one." Tamahome admitted. "To be honest, if you hadn't reacted how you did in the forest, I'd still think Miaka's double was putting us on. I look at you and I can't see it. It's too weird — it doesn't make sense. I mean, cross-dressers aren't meant to look as convincing as you do… are they?"

"I had some help and some valuable advice from a good, loyal friend." Nuriko smiled mischievously, slipping his hand down to the tie of his gown as he loosened the knot of the sash. "But it's all right, Tama-chan. I'll set your mind at rest once and for all. After all, as my fellow Seishi, I shouldn't be shy of sharing my body with you, now should I?"

"Nuriko, what are you going to do?" Tamahome eyed his companion warily, and Nuriko chuckled, slipping down the shoulders of his gown until his chest was exposed. In the strange light of the Taikyoku-zan mountain palace, the symbol of the willow glittered and glowed warmly above his breast, marking him out as Suzaku's warrior, and Tamahome cursed, shaking his head.

"Too, too weird." He said frankly. "Cover up, Nuriko. I can't get my head round this… you're freaking me out."

"I guess you grew up in a sheltered village, huh?" Nuriko did so, eying him speculatively. "No people experimenting with gender and dress there, huh?"

"Definitely not!"

"Well, I guess in the capital, things aren't quite so clear cut and simple." Nuriko shrugged his shoulders. "My family own a very successful textile business, so it wasn't hard to style and choose the way I look, not with so much to choose from. I made a decision, that's all, and I don't regret that decision. This is better for me — and besides, how would I have gotten into the harem if I hadn't looked this much like a girl? When you think about it, it's common sense."

"I can think of a lot of reasons a man would want to get into the Imperial harem, but strangely enough seducing the Emperor isn't one of them." Tamahome said dryly. Nuriko eyed him for a moment, then burst out into infectious laughter, slapping Tamahome on the back and causing him to gasp with pain at the force of the blow.

“Will you quit doing that without thinking about it?” He protested hoarsely, his hand going to his chest as he dragged air into his lungs. “Please God, Nuriko, you might look like a girl but you hit like a ten ton elephant!”

“Whoops… sorry about that.” Nuriko shrugged apologetically. “Guess sometimes I don’t know my own strength.”

“Well, I’d really appreciate it if you’d learn about it a bit quicker, before one of us winds up getting killed.” Tamahome said frankly. “We’re looking to *find* our comrades. Not kill them.”

“Providing Miaka-no-baka comes back to Kounan, of course.” Nuriko rested his chin in his hands, eying Tamahome playfully and absorbing the faint discomfort that flecked in his companion’s eyes. “She might not, now she’s managed to go home. She’s a flake, that’s for sure… she might forget all about us, now that we’ve found a way to send her back.”

“Miaka isn’t like that! She’ll come back — she knows we need her!” Tamahome objected. “You know it as well as I do, Nuriko! Who put her life on the line to save Hotohori-sama and I from the shadow, huh? She’s not going to forget — she’s not that fickle a person, you know!”

“Well, and I thought you were only interested in money.” Nuriko shrugged his shoulders nonchalantly. “I guess we all live and learn.”

“Leave it out, will you? I just said she’d come back — stop sticking innuendo into everything.” Tamahome snapped. “You know, you might be a dude under all that silk. But you really *are* a girl, aren’t you? Your mind works in all kinds of weird, twisted, female ways and it’s making me really uncomfortable. Stop building six hundred scenarios out of one innocent sentence, all right? Miaka will come back. That’s all I’m saying. She’ll come back to Kounan and help us raise Suzaku.”

“Then we’d probably better think about returning there ourselves, so we’re ready to greet her.” Nuriko said benignly, stretching his arms as he got to his feet. “Well, Tama-chan? We should find his Highness and get back to the capital. It’s nice and all, up here on the mountain, but those Nyan-Nyan keep giving me funny looks, and if I let my guard down for a minute they might cut my hair and force me into something as dowdy as what you’re wearing.”

“It wouldn’t hurt you to dress more like a man, now that you’re a warrior of Suzaku.” Tamahome said cuttingly. Nuriko smirked.

“I can be a woman and fight for Suzaku. Miaka’s a woman, after all. Or at least, in training.” He said frankly. “She needs a lot of polishing, but she has the right equipment.”

“Which is more than you do, remember?”

“Oh, Tama-chan, you are getting catty.” Nuriko reproached him. “Better be careful or you’ll be sounding like a woman too!”

Tamahome sighed.

“I’m just tired, and I guess we should head back.” He admitted. “We’ve been away long enough, and if Miaka did return, she probably wouldn’t come back here, would she?”

Nuriko shrugged.

“That’s my reasoning.” He admitted. “So that’s what I suggest we do.”

“Nuriko? Tamahome?” At that moment the Emperor entered the chamber, and Nuriko glanced at him, a frown touching his lips as he absorbed the pallor and tiredness on the man’s face.

“You look all in, your Highness.” He said softly. “Tamahome and I were talking about going back to Eiyou and the palace, but maybe we should rest here a while longer. You were both hurt, after all, and even though I’m all right, we shouldn’t put either of your lives in danger, considering how much strength you gave Miaka to help her get home.”

“Miaka.” Hotohori’s eyes clouded for a moment, then he nodded his head.

“I think we’ll be all right to travel, Nuriko.” He said frankly. “Or perhaps we can ask Taiitsukun for help getting back to the palace. Since she seems disposed to be kind to us, it couldn’t hurt to ask.”

“No, I suppose not.” Nuriko admitted.

“Then I’ll go find her.” Tamahome volunteered. “And ask her if there’s any way she can send us back. Nuriko, if you’re so afraid Nyan-Nyan will fix your, erm, unusual dressing standards, you stay here with his Highness. I’m sure you’d rather do that, in any case.”

Nuriko’s eyes flashed with surprise, then they softened and he offered Tamahome a warm, playful smile.

“Well, maybe I underestimate your ability to understand after all.” He said teasingly. “All right, then. Go. We’ll be waiting, so don’t take too long, Tama-chan!”

Tamahome saluted his companion playfully, then was gone, and Hotohori leant up against the wall, his expression thoughtful. For a while there was silence, then Nuriko moved across the room, dropping down before the Emperor on the floor. Hotohori gazed down at his fellow Seishi in surprise, and Nuriko raised troubled eyes to his travel companion.

"Your Highness, I'm sorry that I deceived you." He said frankly. "About a lot of things. I didn't want you to know about my true self, but now you do — I hope you'll understand and forgive me."

"I find it hard to believe." Hotohori's expression cleared, and he gestured to his companion to get to his feet. "Don't grovel before me like that, Nuriko, not when we're here, and away from the palace. I am Hotohori here, not the Emperor of Kounan, and I'm enjoying that fact, so don't ruin it by pandering to my status. You only put divides between me and my fellow Seishi, when you do things like that. We're not at the palace, so please, meet my gaze and regard me as an equal."

"I don't know if I can do that." Nuriko admitted. "But all right, I'll try."

"You are truly a man, then?"

"I am, sire. In body, if not in soul."

"And you entered my harem… why would you do a thing like that?"

"To be closer to you, of course. Why else?"

"To think that there's another man who's almost as beautiful as I, and so close at hand, too." Hotohori tut-tutted. "You make me quite concerned, when I think about those things. It must be Suzaku's influence — I can't think of any other reason for such an uncanny coincidence."

Despite himself, Nuriko smiled.

"I have always prided myself on my appearance, heika." He said with a shrug. "But it's true that all the members of my family are attractive, so it would've been more uncanny if I had not been beautiful. And I've always resembled a girl far more than I have a boy, in a lot of ways, you know. That's why I go by the name '*Kourin*'. It seems more appropriate to me than my true name, so that is how I prefer to be called."

"But now you are Nuriko, so it carries no importance to me what you called yourself before we became comrades in arms." Hotohori

said lightly. “If you wish to dress as a woman, Nuriko, I will not judge your decision. It is, after all, your choice.”

“Your Highness.” Nuriko bit his lip, slowly shaking his head. “No… I’m just glad you aren’t angry with me. You’d have a good reason to be, I know — a man among all those women. But I never… I’m a faithful kind of girl, that’s the truth of it. And since I first saw you, I was in love with only you. If I hadn’t have been, I never would have stayed in the harem — but at the end of the day, I couldn’t leave. Not when I saw how kind and gentle a man the Emperor truly was.”

He laughed ruefully as colour rose in Hotohori’s cheeks, shaking his head.

“You see, in all ways, I really am a woman.” He added ruefully. “My heart and soul are bound to that path now, I’m afraid.”

“It is not unnatural for a man to love his Emperor.” Hotohori managed at last, and Nuriko shook his head.

“I’m sure that many would not understand what I feel as that kind of love.” He admitted.

“So you came to this life simply to join my harem and be among my chosen women? It seems absurd — do you not think it was the stars of Suzaku that truly drew you to this path?”

“No… it was a little girl and a keepsake ball that drew me to your harem.” Nuriko said reflectively. “It was only once I was there that I knew I had to stay. It wasn’t my intention to stick around — I planned to disappear as soon as I’d passed on Byakuren’s message. But you… you made me change my mind, I suppose. So it went from there.”

“Byakuren?” Hotohori looked confused.

“A little girl you saved from a carriage when you were both just young children.” Nuriko said evenly. “She wanted so much to thank you, but she couldn’t, so I came to do it in her place.”

“I see.” Understanding flickered in the Emperor’s gentle eyes. “I remember. I wondered where that ball came from, and why you gazed at me so intently. It was you, I remember now, who struck me with a certain feeling — a certain sense of friendship and camaraderie that I had not perceived in any of the others. But that you had brought the ball… I understand, now.”

He smiled.

“It was a kind thing to do.” He added.

“Well, Byakuren was like a sister to me.” Nuriko said quietly. “Your Highness, she would have been the one chosen to join your harem, but she was slain by a demon before the messengers came to take her to Eiyou. Because of that, I came in her place. It was what she would have wanted me to do — so I did.”

“I see.” Hotohori’s expression became grave. “Then that explains why I did not see that girl’s face among the gathered women that day, either. It is… it seems a shame. She must have been young still — I feel for her family.”

“Me too.” Nuriko admitted. Then he smiled, as if to break the solemn mood.

“But you see, I knew you had a kind heart, Your Highness.” He added more lightly, the playfulness back in his eyes. “That’s why I love you, after all.”

“Nuriko…”

“Oh, relax and don’t be so tense.” Nuriko shrugged his shoulders. “You weren’t afraid to declare your feelings to Miaka, so at least let me have the same right with you, all right? You never know — being as beautiful as I am, I may yet sway your mind.”

Hotohori opened his mouth to respond, then closed it again, bewildered. At his expression, Nuriko burst out laughing.

“I never knew you could make such a strange face, sire.” He said between giggles. “You really look a sight, staring at me like a dying fish caught up on the land!”

“Nuriko, we may be travelling companions, but that is no way to speak to your Emperor!” Hotohori recovered himself, glaring at the still giggling Nuriko sternly. “Insulting the beauty of your country’s leader is not a perk of a Suzaku warrior, so put the idea out of your mind right now!”

“You seem merry in here.”

Taiitsukun’s creaking tones prevented Nuriko from forming a witty response, as both Seishi turned to face the odd hermit woman, Tamahome in tow. “You want my help to return to Eiyou, I understand?”

“Yes, please.” Nuriko nodded his head, seeing that his Emperor was lost for words at the renewed sight of Taiitsukun’s wizened, wrinkled face. “We’re all tired, and with Miaka gone — can you help us get there, Taiitsukun? We’d all be grateful, if you could — and Hotohori-

sama shouldn't be away from the palace for too long."

"You children."

Taiitsukun tut-tutted under her breath. "Expecting everyone to do things for you."

She sighed, spreading her hands.

"Very well." She conceded. "I will help you, this time, to return to your home. Miaka will return there, after all, not here."

"She will come back, then?" Hotohori asked eagerly, and slowly Taiitsukun nodded.

"She is Suzaku no Miko." She said sagely. "It's her destiny to do so."

"Then we will need to find the other Suzaku warriors, after all." Nuriko pursed his lips thoughtfully, trying to pretend he had not seen the sudden light that flickered in Hotohori's golden gaze. Taiitsukun smiled.

"Without her, it will be a difficult task." She warned. "But if you believe you can do it, I won't try and stop you searching. After all, Seishi may turn up in the oddest of places. Hotohori, you have the ShijinTenchishou scroll, don't you? There will be clues in that to where the other warriors can be found and you should study it well. When Miaka returns, after all, you may find time is of the essence."

"I understand." Hotohori nodded his head. "I'll do exactly that. Thank you for your help, Taiitsukun."

"Well, you've all proven to me that your hearts and souls are now connected with the heart and soul of that silly young glutton we sent back today." Taiitsukun said simply. "Keep faith in her, all of you. Foolish as she seems, Suzaku has blessed her. She has passed my test, and I will also support her. And you. If you need my help, I will try to help you. But I cannot do your tasks for you. So keep in mind and do not stray — Kounan's fate lies in your hands, after all."

She smiled, bringing her hands together as she closed her eyes.

"Now I'll return you to Eiyou, with that thought still strongest in your minds." She added. "Go safely, and keep faith in your Miko. There is much to do, after all, before Suzaku can soar over Kounan's skies."

As she spoke these words, Nuriko felt a strange swirling sensation overtake his body. Momentarily thrown off guard, he tried to glance

around him for any sign of his fellows, but they too seemed to be caught up in the whirl of Taiitsukun's magic and in the end he closed his eyes, struggling against the dizzy nausea that threatened to overwhelm him as the spinning got faster and faster.

Then, as suddenly as it had come, it was gone, and with a thud Nuriko found himself once more on solid ground.

Tentatively he opened one eye, hearing Tamahome's groan from not far away, and realising that wherever they had landed, they had landed as a group. Finding the world was once more still, he opened the other eye, putting out his hands to steady himself as he gazed around him.

"The palace." He whispered, taking in the towering red-stone columns and the gold gilt patterns that rose up to the sky. "She really did send us home, that canny old woman… but what a way to do it."

He glanced at his sleeves.

"It's a wonder I didn't throw up." He added. "And that would have been adding insult to injury where this poor gown was concerned."

"Nuriko? Tamahome? Are you all right?" Hotohori's voice brought him back to the present and he turned, nodding his head as he observed the tall figure of the Emperor standing over him.

"I'm fine, Heika. And Tama-chan's too thick skinned to notice the fall — he probably bounced." He said playfully, a little of his usual mischief back in his tones as he observed a rueful Tamahome rubbing his behind not far away. "We made it back in one piece, just about."

"I heard that." Tamahome paused in his action to send Nuriko an indignant glare. "What do you think that old bag was playing at, anyhow? First testing us, and almost killing Miaka — and now throwing us out of Taikyoku-zan like stones from a slingshot. Do you think she enjoys torturing celestial warriors or is this all part of our 'training'?"

"I have severe reservations in trusting a woman who has such a repulsive appearance." Hotohori admitted. "But it seems that for the time being we have no choice. She is disposed to help us, after all, even if her methods are odd."

He sighed, brushing down his clothing.

"Back to reality — back to work." He murmured, and Nuriko caught the wistful note in his voice. "We'll begin to gather intelligence on the remaining Suzaku Seishi in the morning. I must go meet with

my Council and discover what has happened in my absence. With any luck Miaka will return soon — and then we can continue with doing the God's work!"

"Well, they will do, I suppose. They will do."

Alone in her lofty hideout, Taiitsukun cast a languid hand across the immense glass of the mirror through which she had watched the three Seishi land, a rueful smile touching her seamed face as she remembered Hotohori's disparaging words. "I suppose that children such as that still have things to learn — but learn them they will, I'm sure of that. Yes, Suzaku's plans seem to be progressing smoothly. Suzaku no Miko will soon return, doubtless — in that time, they will no doubt gain in strength and in resolve as a team prepared to sacrifice everything for their country and their faith. Which brings me to another matter…"

She pursed her lips, spreading her fingers once more across the glass as the image faded and hazed into another. Instead of the three Suzaku warriors, the mirror now reflected a devastated, flood-torn landscape, trees torn from their roots and tossed willy-nilly into a rising current. Yet, in the midst of this, one area had escaped the cruel touch of the violent river tempest.

In the midst of this protected land was a young man robed in the tattered clothing of an itinerant monk, his scarred face resolute and determined as he protected the huddled, shivering forms of a peasant man and woman that cowered behind him. The water was receding now, Taiitsukun could see that, and as she took in the determined glitter in the young man's ruby gaze, a flicker of relief stirred in her heart.

"Well, Hou Jun. So you have faced your fear after all." She murmured, reaching out to touch the glass as the scarred monk thoughtfully. "My Chichiri is on the verge of being born, isn't he? It's been a long road, but maybe you are ready to make that transition. Despite your past, and despite the pain that lurks inside of you, I really believe you've found that strength, now. These people who you came to care for, in Seisen-mura, are now in your debt. But I — and Suzaku — are more in theirs than they will ever know. To save you, and to inspire you to save them — this is the true awakening of the Seishi inside of you. That pitiful young man who sought only the darkness has gone now, I think. It's almost time for you to meet the Miko. Almost…"

She frowned, her lips thinning as she remembered Miaka's

departure.

“It is a gamble, to let her go, and to hope she will find her own way back.” She acknowledged. “An unwilling Miko is of no use to Kounan. But things are moving swiftly. Seiryuu’s Shougun has dark magic and darker plans up his sleeve, and as yet, only you are truly aware of their depth, Hou Jun. It’s time you returned to the mountain. Time I told you fully about your fellows — time you found Suzaku no Miko and used those powers of yours to protect her. You hold Suzaku’s core in your heart, my boy — they will rely on you more than you realise, as time goes on.”

She stood, clasping her hands together as the mirror images faded.

“It’s time to bring Hou Jun home, Nyan-Nyan.” She said softly, as a small girl materialised at her side, pigtails bobbing in an imaginary breeze. “His training is complete. The only test now is the real one… whether, as Chichiri, he can truly be a Guardian of Suzaku no Miko.”

Chapter 3

Chapter Two

Souun was already bustling with traders by the time Genrou reached the city limits and, as he made his way down the main street several of the men and women setting up their stalls paused to raise a hand in greeting. A rueful smile touched his lips as he returned the favour, knowing as he did so that no matter how much time he spent on the mountain, or how brave his deeds there had been, he would always be "*Kou-san's Shun'u*" in Souun.

"It's been a while, Shun'u-kun." A broad-chested food merchant remarked as he crossed the dusty road, avoiding the grooves and pits left by years of rattling carriages travelling through the centre on their way to Eiyou. "What brings you here today? You ain't comin' from the village, surely? You came from the mountain way."

"I came from Reikaku-zan." Genrou replied. "An' I'm on an important errand. Junbei-san, tell me, does Sarro-san still do a trade in Souun, or has he moved on to other parts these days? I'd like a word with him, if he's around."

"Sarro? Be on his usual corner, I s'pect." Junbei eyed the youngster in surprise. "Herbs you're wantin' then, is it? Well, you should be able to find him sure enough. Someone sick, are they? You'll have to speak to him about his wares, mind. There's been less of them comin' in, if you get my meaning."

"Less of them?" Genrou frowned, eying the stallholder in confusion. "Why would that be? Sarro-san's always had the pick of stock in Souun — no competitors or nothin' like that. Even the physicians buy from his stall — why would he be havin' problems now?"

"Well, between you an' me, son, things ain't easy for a lot of us." Junbei's expression became troubled. "Truth is, there's been a lot of twitchin' along the Eastern border, see. You may or may not know of it, up in your mountain, but strange things have been afoot in more than just the Eastern Kingdom of late."

"Strange things, huh?" Genrou's eyes narrowed as briefly he remembered the battle with the demon that had stalked Reikaku-zan and claimed the life of at least one young ally. "Guess I know somethin' about it. But affectin' trade? This I didn't know."

“Well, I don’t know the particulars. None of us do.” Junbei admitted with a sigh, heaving his considerable bulk around his stall as he began to put up the canopy to protect his goods from the bright Kounan sun. “But even so, things have been buzzin’ around that even the likes of us get to know about them. There’s rumours all right — rumours that are ugly, for that matter.”

“Ugly rumours?” Genrou asked, reaching across to help the older man steady the beam of wood, and Junbei cast him a grateful smile.

“Ah, you’re still as good a kid as ever, Shun’u-kun. Truth is that these days it’s hard to get the help an’ since my son was married, well, he’s had other things on his mind than comin’ by my stall. If you can hold it steady, we’ll get it right — I appreciate it, you know.”

“It’s no big deal.” Genrou shrugged. “You’re tellin’ me somethin’ I don’t know, after all. There’s problems with tradin’ in Souun, then? Because of… what? You said the East — what has Kutou got to do with this part of Kounan? We’re miles from the friggin’ place — Sairou’s our nearest neighbour an’ Reikaku-zan sees that no trouble comes through from that way.”

He straightened, pride in his bronze eyes at this juncture, and Junbei laughed, patting the young bandit on the shoulder.

“You don’t change.” He observed ruefully. “But I won’t argue with you. I have faith that whatever goes on on that mountain, if you’re involved in it, it can’t be all bad.”

He stood back, eying the canopy with an approving nod.

“And that was quicker than usual. My thanks, kid.”

“Welcome.” Genrou returned the grin with a wolfish one of his own. “Jus’ do me a favour an’ don’t tell my Ma or my sisters that you saw me here this mornin’, all right? It’s market day an’ I don’t need to clash with any of them when I have my own errands to run — is it a deal?”

“Oh, I don’t get involved in those things. You needn’t worry about that.” Junbei assured him. “Far too much to do puttin’ out my wares an’ gettin’ a sale out of them to start gossipin’ about customers to others. I won’t tell them a thing, Shun’u-kun. You can trust in me.”

He bent down to lift the nearest crate of goods, dumping it onto the stall with a heavy thud.

“As for Kutou, there’s been rumours for a while that they’re plannin’ an invasion.” He said, his tones more serious as he

remembered the boy's original question. "As you say, here's not near that border, but it all has a knock on effect. Tradin' is becomin' ropey in all parts of Kounan since the stories began. Suppliers an' traders are all becomin' uneasy, an' many don't want to trust carts to roads between cities. S'why you're in luck — Sarro was goin' to go east, but he decided against, havin' heard the stories. Even so, though, he gets supplies through that route. An' now… well, you can see for yourself when you speak to him. Almost all trade with Kutou's dried up completely. An' whatever goods he could only get from the Dragon's country…"

He trailed off, spreading his hands, and Genrou digested this slowly, a fanged tooth protruding over his lower lip as he absorbed all the implications.

"Damn those Eastern bastards." He murmured. "War'll screw everythin' around, won't it? The Emperor'll start callin' on people to fight his battles, an' even Souun won't escape that backlash."

"There's already been a whisper of conscription, though nothing's begun as yet." Junbei agreed. "You and your mountain buddies should be prepared, Shun'u-kun. You're already wearin' a sword, after all. You're an inch away from a trained soldier so far as those people think, and if it really is war…"

"If it really is war, those Eastern jerks had better keep their paws off our land." Genrou said darkly. "Don't worry, Junbei-san. No way that Reikaku-zan'll stand by an' let Dragon-worshippers trample all over our patch."

"Spoken by a true child of Suzaku." Junbei observed amusedly, and Genrou froze, staring at him in consternation.

"Child of…? What do you mean?"

"Well, s'what we all are, ain't it?" Junbei looked surprised, eying the boy's expression in confusion. "Suzaku's people. We're from Kounan, ain't we? Sure as hell even common folk like us haven't escaped the Phoenix's gaze completely. Or don't you think so?"

"Oh." Genrou looked sheepish, shrugging his shoulders. "I guess you're right. I hadn't thought it out that way, but I guess… I guess you're right."

"Still, some of us are more Suzaku's than others, if the stories are right." Junbei looked pensive, casting a glance up at the sky as if expecting to see the silhouette of the divine bird soaring above them even then. "I don't know as whether I put faith in them or not, but it's

oft been said that Saihitei-sama himself has a keen interest in the legends of the Miko an' the stories of Suzaku's chosen. Maybe they're true, or maybe a myth, I don't know. But I know I've heard stories of a boy with the mark of the demon on his brow… sure as hell enough people have told it to make it near enough fact."

"The mark of the demon." Genrou bit his lip. "What does that mean? I don't understand."

"The *oni*, boy." Junbei grinned, reaching up a fat finger to pat his sweat-soaked brow. "Right here, in blood red light. I ain't seen it myself, so I don't know whether it's the truth or not. But traders say they have. He's been seen in Eiyou, on more than one occasion. A boy with the '*oni*' mark right here. You know, you should come down from the mountain more, Shun'u-kun. You'd find out a lot more information if you did."

"Suzaku's stuff ain't somethin' I pay a lot of attention to." Genrou said quietly. "So I doubt I'd have cared even if someone had told me. What the hell difference does it make, havin' some red mark tattooed on you to not? I don't get it. I don't see what makes them so much different — or why it is they matter so much."

"Well, it's beyond the ken of ordinary folk like us, most likely." Junbei said comfortably. "But so as they say, when the country is threatened then the girl'll come from the other world an' save all of us by summonin' Suzaku. An' this *oni-shounen* is one of her chosen Seishi — one of those stars of Suzaku who'll help her do it. Don't pretend to understand the magic of it — but so long as they're about, surely, Kounan'll be all right."

"Or maybe, because they're about, the whole world'll fall apart." Genrou said darkly, and at this uncharacteristically bitter remark, Junbei stared at him in surprise.

"Shun'u-kun?"

"If people didn't have red marks, then shit wouldn't be fallin' on Kounan, would it?" Genrou responded, his fingers absently going to his bound right arm as he felt the faint buzzing of warm magic spreading once more across his skin. "What if they ain't Suzaku's protectors, but the reason the country's in danger? It's all crazy if you ask me. Ordinary folk should do what they can to protect the things 'round them an' keep their people an' their families safe. Whatever magic this Miko girl has, she's still just a girl an' she ain't even from Kounan. If we fight a war then dammit we'll fight it — but that's as far as it goes."

“Well, I suppose we’ll see.” Junbei reflected. “Far as I see it, Kutou’s the root cause of most of the trouble this time around. But I guess we’ll see as it goes. So long as our trading gets cut off, there’ll be inflation an’ all the things that go with it, so the sooner Saihitei-sama drives them back the better.”

“No kidding.” Genrou said softly, and Junbei cast him a sympathetic look.

“Guess you must be worryin’ ’bout those sisters of yours.” He reflected. “Things happen to women, after all, in times of war.”

“Not my sisters.” Genrou said with certainty. “Noone’d dare try, if he had any sense about him. An’ if he didn’t, they’d soon knock it into ’em. They’re little short of demons themselves, my sisters.”

Junbei laughed, shaking his head.

“You’d better watch your tongue.” He advised. “Your Ma’d not stand for that, even if you have left home.”

“That’s why they don’t need to know I’m in town.” Genrou grinned unrepentantly, revealing fang-sharp teeth as he did so. “I’m goin’ to tackle Sarro-san an’ see what herbs he has. Thanks for the info, Junbei-san. I’ll take it back t’the mountain with me when I go. We’ll be ready if those Eastern bastards try their luck in these parts.”

With that he was gone across the street, whistling a soft tune under his breath as he thrust his hands in his pockets, affecting the most carefree gait he could muster. It was, after all, a bright sunny day, with not a cloud on the horizon. And yet, somewhere deep inside of him he felt an uncharacteristic swirl of misgivings curl itself around his heart. The warm taint of the ‘*tsubasa*’ mark on his arm was also still on his mind, and before he reached the corner where the herbalist Sarro plied his wares, he paused at one of the fabric stalls, fumbling in the depths of his jacket pocket for coin with which to buy a thick strip of sturdy white bandaging.

“That should do the trick.” He decided, even as he tossed the tarnished handful of *mon* into the stallkeeper’s greedy fist, assuring him that it wasn’t for an injury and that he didn’t need to buy any more supplies for the meantime. “Noone’d see the thing through stuff this thick, an’ noone will ask questions of a bandit with a strapped arm. Sword support, is all. My right arm, after all. Noone’ll think it odd — an’ this makeshift shit isn’t goin’ to last the day if the sun keeps risin’ like this. I’m already sweatin’ like a pig an’ it’s barely past daybreak.”

His mind flitted back to the stricken Kashira atop Reikaku-zan and he frowned, hardening his resolve.

“I’ll ask an’ I’ll see, even if he can’t help.” He reflected, crossing the square towards Sarro’s distinctive stall. “He might know somethin’, after all.”

As he approached the trader’s deceptively ramshackle construction, the mingled smell of various herbs twitched at his nose and despite himself he sneezed, causing a lady who had been passing nearby to jump and almost fall backwards onto the ground. At the sight of him, the stallholder laughed, shaking his head ruefully as he regarded the youngest member of the Kou clan.

“I can always count on you to make your presence felt, can’t I, Shun’u?” He asked resignedly. “What is it this time? Bumps? Grazes? Too much ale or too many butamans? What kind of remedy are you needin’ today — or, judging by your sneezin’, is it just a summer cold?”

“It’s your goddamn herbs makin’ me sneeze.” Genrou objected, shaking his head. “An’ no. It’s not for me. Listen, Sarro-san. My buddy’s taken sick with a fever. It’s a weird kind of thing — I ain’t seen it’s like before — but I promised I’d try get a remedy for him an’ I knew you’d be the guy to ask. You’ve always helped on the farm, after all — whenever any of my sisters needed somethin’, an’ when Rin’an was laid up with that fever you were the one Ma went to. So I figured if anyone would know, it would be you. What about it? Any ideas?”

“You haven’t told me much, boy, and I don’t have as many things to call on as I’d like.” Sarro eyed him thoughtfully. “You know, I suppose, that trade on the roads is poor these days?”

“Kutou. Yeah. I know. Junbei-san told me about those Eastern bastards ploughin’ up the borderlands like they’re plannin’ to strike.” Genrou’s eyes darkened. “I know all about it. But even so, you must have somethin’? He’s pretty laid up with it an’ it ain’t like him. He ain’t shakin’ it off, either. It’s been eatin’ at him a while… t’be honest, none of us really know what it is that’s plaguin’ him. It ain’t catchin’ — least, sure as hell none of us have caught it yet. But it’s a weird thing. His temp’s been high an’ he’s been… out of character. Like he’s worryin’ about things… more than he should. His whole manner’s changed — it’s like the illness is eatin’ him from the inside out.”

“I see.” Sarro’s thin, pinched features became thoughtful, and Genrou hovered eagerly, waiting for the man’s judgement. Although

Sarro was nothing more than a street vendor, and certainly not a trained medic in any regard, he had gained something of a reputation in local Souun circles for his acquired knowledge of herbs and remedies, and it wasn't unusual for people to ask his advice, no matter what the ailment.

At length the man sighed, shaking his head.

"I've heard of such cases." He said at length. "But if it's a cure you're wanting, Shun'u, I'm not your man. Herbs might relieve the symptoms — but I doubt they'd cure them completely. I don't know what they call it — but I've heard of it infesting villages and towns to the North. Maybe it's a curse brought by those Eastern demons — I don't know, but I wouldn't be surprised. Still, either way, there's nothing I can sell you which will take it away."

At this, Genrou's heart clenched in his chest, and his eyes widened in dismay.

"But… are you sayin'…there's nothing…?"

He trailed off, afraid that his emotions might get the better of him, and at his expression, Sarro pursed his lips, shrugging his shoulders.

"Nothing I can give you." He repeated. "This person… they mean somethin' to you, then, Shun'u? Someone important — a good friend?"

"Someone I owe a lot to." Genrou agreed softly. "Sarro-san, if there's anythin'…"

"Well, there's only the one thing." Sarro leant back against his stall thoughtfully, eying the young bandit as he did so. "But I can't make you a promise, Shun'u, because my information is only vague in itself. Maybe it's just a myth — or someone's wishful thinking. But I said there'd been talk of this kind of thing up north, didn't I? This disease which saps strength and life from people."

"Yes." Genrou nodded his head. "Does that mean… someone up there…?"

"I heard there was a doctor who'd fashioned some kind of a cure, yes." Sarro agreed. "What his secret is, I wouldn't like to tell you. But I heard about it, sure enough. It'd be a long trek, though — even for a young'un like yourself. The place was somewhere up along the Shouryuu river or thereabouts — near the place where the floods were some years back. People have said all that river water is the reason they've been so badly hit by plagues since, but I don't know. Perhaps because of it local doctors there have found things that work and are

using them to their best ability. Either way, if you want a cure, that's the only thing I can think of to tell you. Head for the Shouryuu and speak to the people in those parts. If they can't help, I don't know who can."

"The North country, huh…" Genrou looked thoughtful, chewing down on his lip as he pondered the situation. "Shit. I ain't never been far from this area — an' you're not kidding when you say it's a long way. But considerin' what you said… I can't not do anything. So I guess that's what I'll have to do. If the cure ain't in Souun, well, I'll have to go somewhere else an' that seems to be my best bet."

He cast Sarro a grin.

"Thanks, Sarro-san." He said warmly. "I appreciate it."

"Well, your family and I go back a long way, kid." Sarro returned the smile with one of his own. "Good luck — I hope you find what you're looking for."

"Me too." Genrou became suddenly serious. "An' in time enough for it to help, too."

"Shun'uuuuu!"

As he made his way slowly away from the man's stall, a woman's voice cut through his thoughts and he froze, eyes widening in horror as he recognised the distinctive pitch of the girl's shrill shriek. Hastily he glanced around him for somewhere to hide, but before he could dart into one of the many side alleys, determined fingers clasped themselves around his arm, and he was forcibly swung around to face a slim young woman some years his senior. From the look on her face, she meant business, and despite his year and a half with the bandit posse, Genrou found himself instinctively tensing, as if ready to flinch back from a flying fist.

"It *is* you." The girl eyed him closely, then, "Good. That saves us a walk."

"I *told* you it was Shun'u, Oneesan." The original speaker hurried up to join them at that moment, her own curious gaze looking the bandit up and down as she did so. "But what is he wearing? Shun'u-kun, are you trying to be cute?"

"More like violent, carrying a thing like that around with him." The other girl indicated Genrou's sword with a derisive snort, and despite himself Genrou found he was lost for words, the wind taken completely out of his sails by the suddenness of their assault.

The oldest girl sent him a scrutinous glance, then,

“So you’re up to no good in Souun this mornin’? Or were you actually goin’ to come pay a visit to us an’ see how we were, in your absence?”

“Aidou-neechan.” At length Genrou found his voice. “Shit, what are you doing here this early? I was gonna be out an’ away from here by the time you girls…”

He trailed off, realising he’d already said too much and that there was a forbidding glint in his companion’s eye.

The second girl sighed, shrugging her shoulders as if it was to be expected.

“Shun’u’s being Shun’u. As usual.” She said frankly. “But we’ve found him, so we don’t have to go anywhere else looking. And we got a good deal on Mother’s vegetables, so we can head back to the farm early. Everything’s worked out pretty well — hasn’t it, Oneesan?”

“Found… me?” Genrou’s expression became wary as he took a step back. “What do you mean, Manka — found me? Why were you looking for me? What were you…”

“Why shouldn’t we look for you?” Aidou was the one who answered, putting her hands on her hips as she regarded him disapprovingly. “You’re the man of the family after Pa, ain’t you? Jus’ because you think you’ve run away from your responsibilities to play sword games with bandits doesn’t take that away from you. An’ when something troubles your family you ought t’be jumpin’ in an’ fixin’ it — if you’re a real man, like you keep tryin’ to make us believe.”

“Aww, Neechan, at least tone it down, will you?” Genrou sighed, realising that more than a few passers by had paused to glance in their direction. “Whatever it is, it can’t be as important as what I’m doing, in any case. I have to go to the North, an…”

“You have to come with us back to the farm.” Aidou’s grip tightened on his wrist, and Genrou glared at her, fighting to pull free. Despite her slight form, however, Aidou was surprisingly strong, and she kept hold, fixing him with the darkest look she could muster. “It’s your duty to protect us, after all. What kind of man runs off and abandons his sisters, anyway? You’re coming back with us, Shun’u. There’s no argument about it. Ma’s said it too — to get you an’ bring you home.”

Manka nodded her head decidedly at her sister’s words, and as Genrou glanced from one girl to the other, he knew that the battle was

lost. He sighed heavily, dropping his head in defeat.

“Fine.” He said shortly. “I’ll come back with you. But only briefly — you understand? I got something important that needs doin’ and I can’t wait around runnin’ your errands an’ doing your odd-jobs for you. Maybe I’m the only son, but Pa’s still around, ain’t he? It’s not like there’s noone on the farm an’ besides, you girls can friggin’ look after yourselves.”

Thwack!

Aidou’s hand came down sharply across the back of Genrou’s head and despite himself he yelped, glaring at her in indignation.

“Hey! That hurt!”

“Well, then don’t say stupid things.” Was Aidou’s acerbic rejoinder. “An’ come on. You know well as I do that Pa’s fragile an’ we can’t expect him to do all the things a young man might. *You’re* the one who should be doin’ them — you’re the one who should be takin’ care of the farm an’ everything else. If you’d get that into your thick head, I’d not have to hit you so often, would I?”

Genrou groaned, rubbing the back of his head ruefully.

“An’ you say you need my protection.” He muttered, as he reluctantly fell into step with the two young women. “What from, anyway? Why the sudden urge to kidnap me an’ drag me home? If nothing’s happened to anyone, why do you need me so urgently?”

“Nothing’s happened… yet.” Manka sent him a reproachful glance, and Genrou frowned, glancing from one sister to the other.

“Yet?” He echoed, and Aidou nodded.

“Some suspicious people have been sniffin’ round the village of late.” She said seriously, the hostile note in her tones fading as she relayed the true reason for their coming. “Particularly round the farm, but all abouts, really. Askin’ questions. Pokin’ their nose in where it ain’t wanted. One of them… last night, Ma saw him at the edge of our land, starin’ up at the house as if he was lookin’ to see in for some reason.”

“Suspicious people, huh?” Despite his irritation at having been so summarily approached, Genrou’s brows knitted together in indignation at this. “Round our farm? What kind of questions? What do they want?”

“If we knew that, we’d have sent them packin’ already.” Aidou said smartly. “But that’s jus’ it. They’ve not come close enough to us to

really… well, it's like they've got things they want t'know, see. An' there's another thing, too. It's about… that. It seems like they've come to the village because of… *that.*"

"That?" Genrou eyed her in confusion, and Aidou sighed, rolling her eyes.

"Yes. *That.*" Manka said emphatically, reaching out to nudge Genrou's bandaged right arm, and despite himself, Genrou paled.

"Suzaku's…?"

"Yes." Aidou said briskly. "But we don't know who they are, or what they want. Jus' that they're there. An' Ma thought they might mean us — or you, or the farm — harm. So she said, go get Shun'u. Bring him back. Let him see what the hell's goin' on an' if there's action to be taken… it's his job. *Your* job. Do you understand now? You have to come home."

Genrou was silent for a moment, a mixture of emotions swelling up in his heart as he realised the truth in his sister's words.

"But I have to go North." He murmured. "It's important… I have to."

"No. *This* is important." Aidou shook her head firmly. "Do you understand, Shun'u? These might be from the Emperor in Eiyou — these people may be lookin' for you to drag you off to fight some unknown enemy an' come back a corpse. Or they might not be — they might be somethin' worse. But there's been whispers round these parts of late of a boy in Eiyou with the mark of the demon on his brow. So it ain't just you — there are others. An' if there are others… someone's bound to realise sooner or later that they've got to track you down, too."

Genrou cursed under his breath.

"I told you. I'm not interested in Suzaku's mark." He said quietly. "Ma ain't ever liked it — she's always slapped me if I even talked about it. You guys too, for that matter — an' now you're discussin' it openly like it's the most important thing in the world all of a sudden. If this guy's stalkin' round the farm, well, I'll send him packin'…if that's what you want me to do. But noone's cartin' me off anywhere. I ain't bein' dragged to the Emperor an' I ain't anyone's puppet. I'm a bandit, after all. I don't have to follow other people's rules."

"Except Ma's rules, unless you want a good hiding." Manka observed innocently, and Genrou cast her a dark look.

“I told you. I’m not stopping at home long.” He said brusquely. “I’ll flush out these creeps, if that’s why you’ve dragged me back. But that’s it. I have other things to do — things which have nothin’ to do with Suzaku an’ nothin’ to do with any of you!”

So, this was the area that Kutou’s dark army now sought to oppress.

In the bright summer sunlight, the solitary figure paused at the edge of a cluster of trees, gazing down across the valley at the hills and fields beyond. From his vantage point he could see many villages dotted here and there between streams and rivers, and despite himself a faint flicker of nostalgia rose in his chest as he remembered his own village and the long journey on which he’d come.

But this was not his village, nor was it the run of the Shouryuu river that had both destroyed and rebuilt his life over the past few years. This was the Eastern border, and, beyond the line of the river he knew lay the closely guarded border of Kutou, the Kingdom of the Dragon whose emblem fluttered in the wind over the stone-built divides.

Kutou, huh?

A faint shiver went down his spine as he remembered his brief, fleeting impression of the Eastern Shougun and the cold, glassy glitter of emptiness in his beautiful blue eyes. In that moment he had felt both revulsion and pity for the stranger — revulsion for the darkness that clung so heavily to the man’s being, but pity for the hole that had burrowed deep inside of him. Hou Jun knew he had seen that emptiness before. It had been in the depths of his own gaze when, gazing into the river water at his scarred reflection, he had demanded time and time again to know the truth about his friend’s betrayal.

“But I’ve moved past that place.” He reproached himself firmly, giving himself a mental shake as he drew his mind back to the matter at hand. “And whatever his background, I know that Kutou’s Shougun is our enemy. It’s more than just the mark of Seiryuu on his brow. It’s the darkness that Taiitsukun warned me of… I can feel it pulsing from him. Whatever this force is, it’s destructive and evil. And after what happened to Seisen — what almost became of the people there — I can’t rest easy and assume the job is done. It hasn’t even begun yet. I haven’t even taken my first step.”

He sighed, turning away from the view as he made his way more deeply into the forest. He had known without Taiitsukun telling him that the Miko’s chi had disappeared from their world, and if he had

been fully honest with himself, he would have owned that he felt relief at the fact their meeting had been so delayed. Resolved as he was now to follow his destiny, there was still that thread of human doubt lurking behind the mask he had worn ever since he had left the holy mountain. Whether it focused his magic or it didn't, Hou Jun didn't know. But that it allowed him to smile even when he was on the verge of tears — that protection was something he was not ready to give up.

"The only sorcerer." He mused, crouching down to touch the dying embers of the fire that had kept him warm the previous night. "No pressure, then. Even with all the things Taiitsukun has taught me. I don't have Nyan Nyan now. I don't have that to fall back on. She told me I'd passed and so I did, saving Kourin and Shuusei from the Rising Dragon River. But saving the whole of Kounan is a bigger job. I might have to face bigger things — darker things. That Shougun — almost certainly. Taiitsukun made quite plain the fact that I knew more of Kutou's ill will than any of my fellow Seishi. I wonder what kind of people they are. Three of them already surround Suzaku no Miko. Tamahome. Nuriko. Hotohori. That leaves three as yet unaccounted for. Tasuki. Chiriko. Mitsukake. And, of course, me. Chichiri. The seven stars of Suzaku."

He lounged back against the trunk of a nearby tree, jingling the chains of his *shakujou* idly between his fingers as he stared up at the mottled sky that peeked through the branches swaying gently over his head.

"As someone who pretends to be a monk, I have no right to question the will of a God." He murmured aloud, a rueful smile touching his lips. "But I really don't understand why I was chosen to do this. Of all people, why me? I'll do it — I'm ready now to be whatever kind of sacrifice Suzaku needs me to be. But I don't understand it any better. Why am I so much stronger than any of the people I grew up with? Even now I have doubts… and Chichiri shouldn't have doubts."

A rustle from the branches drew him from his reverie and he pulled himself into a proper sitting position, watching the bird flutter from perch to perch, chirruping a merry, carefree song as it went about its daily business. Despite his preoccupations, Hou Jun found a certain sense of comfort in the bird's free and easy movements. He was like it, in some ways, he knew that. He had no ties, no roots, nothing to hold him back. However cruel it had been, this was his purpose and he had moved towards it at last. Whether he understood it or not, he was Chichiri. And there was nothing left to do but get on with it.

“Meanwhile, whilst Suzaku no Miko is not here, I have a chance to learn a little more about my fellow Seishi.” He reflected, getting to his feet. “Since Taiitsukun told me about them, and since their life forces left traces at Taikyoku-zan, I’m pretty sure finding them shouldn’t be that difficult. I should at least learn something about my allies, before I venture to call them that.”

He smiled, twitching his *kasa* as he contemplated where to begin.

“Eiyou, I think.” He decided. “The Palace. And the one blessed above all of us — Saihitei-sama, Emperor of Kounan.”

Chapter 4

Chapter Three

So that was how things were.

Hotohori sighed, resisting the urge to run his fingers through his thick long hair as he pored over the map of the Eastern region one more time. It was late into the night now, and his councillors had mostly retired to their own quarters, but somehow the Emperor could not rest as easily. After all, he reflected grimly, they could rely on him to take action. He only had his own judgement to trust, and the threat along the border was growing ever more apparent.

“Hotohori-sama?”

A voice from the doorway startled him and he glanced up, rolling up the map and pushing it to one side as he met the gaze of his fellow stellar warrior. Tamahome looked preoccupied too, he reflected, and for the briefest moment he wondered if the other Seishi was thinking about Suzaku no Miko. It had been three days now since they had returned from Taikyoku-zan, and despite the fact Taiitsukun’s words still rang in his ears, Hotohori was finding the girl’s absence a trial. As Emperor, he knew that Kounan needed her. But as a man — a lonely Prince — he knew he needed her more.

“Is something the matter, Tamahome?” He asked now, his tones even and pleasant as he suppressed his feelings beneath his Imperial demeanour. “You seem troubled — is there something I can help you to resolve?”

“I guess not.” Tamahome looked surprised, a frown crossing his features at this question. “I just wondered if you’d heard anything. About… Suzaku. Or… that kind of thing.”

“*About Miaka*.” Hotohori mentally replaced Tamahome’s words with the man’s true meaning, knowing that his own thoughts had been lodged in the same direction since the moment they had touched down in Eiyou. However, he said nothing of the sort, merely offering his comrade a fleeting smile.

“Taiitsukun did say it would be difficult for us to do, without Miaka.” He said briskly, crossing the chamber to retrieve the red scroll that contained the hints and clues for Suzaku’s divine path. “And I haven’t had much time since we returned to properly study it. You’re

welcome to look at it with me, however… if you think you might be able to shed some light on what's written inside."

"I suppose it wouldn't hurt." Tamahome admitted. "I remember Miaka said she had one of those… or at least, that she'd seen it before, somehow. The scroll, I mean. Which means that even in her world she must have some clues about this."

He sighed, shaking his head as if to clear it.

"My character's been appearing on and off a lot lately." He added. "And it makes me uneasy. When she's not here — it's not been like this before. Do you… is it the same for you?"

"Yes." Hotohori's fingers instinctively went to his neck, and he nodded. "I've had a similar impulse. I've told myself it is the after effects of our trip to see Taiitsukun, but I greatly fear…"

He trailed off, his gaze drifting towards the folded map, and Tamahome's brows knitted together.

"Something on that map we should be worrying about?" He asked sharply, and Hotohori shook his head.

"No. Not yet." He said frankly. "At present it's just a matter for an Emperor to lose sleep over. Nothing you or Nuriko need worry about."

He glanced around him.

"Where *is* Nuriko, anyway?"

"S… *He* said something about going to the harem." Tamahome said, a rueful look touching his lips as he corrected himself in mid-speech. "To see some girl called 'Houki'. I don't know who that is, or if you mind him running riot in there now you know he's a guy and all, but I figured it wasn't for me to point it out to him."

"The harem? I see." Hotohori's expression became pensive, as he remembered Nuriko's faltering confession.

"*Since I first saw you, I was in love with only you. If I hadn't have been, I never would have stayed in the harem — but at the end of the day, I couldn't leave. Not when I saw how kind and gentle a man the Emperor truly was.*"

He shook his head.

"I don't believe Nuriko is the kind of man to pose any danger to the seraglio." He said now. "I don't think… he's that kind of man at all."

"Hard to believe he's any kind of man, t'be honest." Tamahome

owned. “I still have to do a double-take every time I see he… *him*.”

“Yes.” Hotohori agreed. “Still, whoever this Houki girl is, she’s probably a friend from the time he spent there. Let him be, Tamahome. We won’t disturb him at this late hour, and I have no objection to him having such free reign in areas he probably knows better than I do myself.”

“Your Highness doesn’t spend time in the seraglio?” Tamahome looked surprised, then, as he realised the impertinence of his question, he reddened, holding up his hands.

“That’s none of my business, is it?”

“It’s no secret.” Hotohori shrugged, turning his attention back to the scroll as if the subject didn’t matter at all. “I’m not interested in taking the favours of girls sent to be my concubines by scheming fathers or persuasive officials. Right now Kounan and its safety is my only concern. Nothing else matters. I have plenty of time to worry about marriage and dynasty. For the time being, I’ll focus on Suzaku and saving my country.”

He glanced up.

“As Emperor and as Hotohori, that duty remains the same.”

“I suppose it does.” Tamahome acknowledged. “But even despite of that — aren’t you interested even a little bit in the girls that came here? Obviously, Nuriko’s the exception — but…”

He trailed off, and Hotohori’s eyes narrowed as he registered his companion’s thought process. Slowly he shook his head.

“Since I was a boy, I’ve always entertained other ideas.” He said markedly, running his index finger down the column of inked characters until he reached the two that made up the word “Miko.” He did not say any more, but from the flicker that surfaced briefly in Tamahome’s violet eyes, he knew he had made his point.

For a moment, an awkward silence fell over the chamber. Then, at length, Tamahome laughed.

“I suppose I’ve never thought about much more than making money.” He owned, though there was a hint of reservation in his tones, and Hotohori knew that, allies they might now be, but rivals they had also become. “So I’m no different.”

“Money and nothing else?” Hotohori turned the topic onto safer grounds, eying his companion quizzically. “Isn’t that singular? There’s more to life than being rich, you know.”

He sighed, suddenly tired.

“Believe me, a caged bird has no room to fly, even if the cage is made of gold.”

At this sudden observation, Tamahome’s eyes widened in surprise. Then a flicker of a smile twitched at his lips.

“I have my reasons, Heika. Just like you.” He said cryptically. “We all have to do what we must to survive, after all.”

Hotohori frowned, confused by his companion’s choice of words, but he chose not to pursue it. Instead he returned his gaze to the scroll, reading over the text carefully.

“I swear that each time I attempt to read this document, the words have somewhat changed.” He admitted. “It makes finding my bearings very difficult.”

“That’s probably why we need Miaka.” Tamahome peered at the old text with a grimace. “It’s not very clear. How old is this thing, anyhow? How many Emperors back are we going?”

“Four.” Hotohori replied. “It was given to the Emperor who ruled before my father and his predecessor. It is old, but it has retained its form and is still clear enough to make out — fortunately for us.”

“Maybe, if you have an Imperial education.” Tamahome muttered, but Hotohori pretended not to have heard him. Instead he stretched a fine, pale finger to tap the edge of the scroll.

“Either way, those characters suggest a man of religious persuasion.” He said briskly. “I don’t understand the reference of a river, nor can I make out the clue to his location. But surely that’s something to go on. A man of spirituality must surely be a strong ally for Suzaku’s cause.”

“A monk, huh?” Tamahome grinned. “Well, that shouldn’t be that hard… should it? Where are the nearest communes and monastic houses to the capital? With all the resources at your disposal, you must be able to send out people to ask questions?”

“Yes… and I will do so, first thing tomorrow.” Hotohori agreed. “At the very least we must do some groundwork, and if I can spare people to go in person, so much the better. My resources, as you term them, are somewhat strained at present. However, this is a need… so in the circumstances…”

He trailed off, remembering once more the situation along the Eastern border.

“Tomorrow.” He repeated. “I will speak to the Council forthwith and we will decide on the best course of action.”

“And Miaka will surely be back soon, in any case.” Tamahome said evenly, though there was no concealing the hope from his tones. “Taiitsukun did say she’d come back — right?”

“She did, and I have faith.” Hotohori carefully re-fastened the scroll. “That’s the strongest thing we can do at present, Tamahome. We can keep faith that our Miko will return and help us save Kounan.”

Well, so this was the palace.

Hou Jun paused outside the immensity of the red-stained gates, gazing up with a mixture of awe and resolution at the towering marble building of ruby and gold that loomed beyond. Thanks to his father’s line of work, he had grown up with a healthy respect for Kounan’s Imperial house, yet this was the first time he had ever been this close to the Emperor’s base, and for a moment he just stared at it, working out carefully his next course of action. In the bustle of carrying out their every day duties, few had taken any notice of the stranger, and Hou Jun knew that, despite his unusual appearance, the garb of a monk would likely protect him from too much curiosity. Men of religion were, after all, believed to be above and beyond the taint of evil, and it was unlikely that one travelling alone would mean Saihitei-sama any harm.

“But what kind of a man *is* he?” Hou Jun wondered. “To live in a place like this, surrounded by the finesse and pomp of the royal line… he is young, I know that much. And he bears the mark of the sea serpent on his body, because everywhere I’ve travelled the rumours I’ve heard have proven Taiitsukun’s remarks to be correct. Saihitei-sama is indeed on of Suzaku’s chosen. I wonder if that will be a help or a hindrance in the time to come.”

He frowned, pursing his lips as he mustered his magic, preparing to shift himself from the busy Eiyou street to the roof of the building itself. Although he could feel the prickling chi of someone with Suzaku’s energy, it was proving difficult for him to distinguish whether or not it was the life force of the Emperor he sought or whether it was one of his companions.

That there might be more than one Seishi at the palace had not occured to him until now, and inwardly he berated himself for having been so short-sighted.

“Even though Suzaku no Miko is not here, there’s no reason why

Nuriko and Tamahome shouldn't be in Saihitei-sama's company." He reflected, hazing his form into his *kasa* and re-materialising on a secluded, secure section of the red-tiled roof as he settled himself more comfortably on his perch. Crossing his legs, he set his *kasa* down to his side, stretching out his senses across the palace complex as he sought out the source of the odd prickles of energy that danced and twitched at his senses.

Yes, it was beyond a doubt now. There were three distinct entities within the palace that burned with Suzaku's magic, and as he carefully separated them from each other, Hou Jun recognised each as the beings who had left traces of their presence on Taikyoku-zan.

"The question is whether or not to reveal myself, you know." He murmured softly, folding his hands together in his lap as he considered the situation. "It seems superfluous, when the Miko isn't here. And I would rather be sure of my ground first. But, that said… considering the threat posed by Kutou… I wonder if Saihitei-sama is aware of it yet? If not, my concealing myself might work to Kounan's disadvantage, and I'm Chichiri now. I can't let harm come to the South."

Carefully he lay his *shakujou* across his lap, using the corner of his cape to rub the dirt and dust of his journey off the shining metal as the rings jingled gently in the wind. Absently he wondered whether or not his comrades could sense him as strongly as he could now sense them, but then he remembered Taiitsukun's words, and he sighed.

"The only sorcerer. Right." He muttered. "So they probably don't have any idea I'm here. Not like that blond haired Shougun. Taiitsukun wasn't kidding… this isn't going to be easy."

He tightened his grip on his *shakujou*, closing his eyes as he defined each of the distinctive life-forces in his mind's eye. Although he had never met any of his Suzaku brethren, he found that from each of them shone a distinctive characteristic, and it was not hard for him to isolate the Emperor's presence. A smile flickered at the corner of his lips as he made up his mind.

"If they don't know I'm here, I might as well have some fun." He reflected, getting to his feet as he brought his fingers up before his face. Muttering a spell, he blurred his features into those of a palace official, shifting his life force once more as he exited the *kasa* within the heart of the palace grounds. Pausing a moment to catch his breath, he darted into the shade of a nearby building, resting the *shakujou* against the wall as he resolved to come back for it later.

“Noone will pay any attention to it, but even if they do, they won’t be able to touch it.” He reasoned, drawing his hand sharply across it as he projected a protective barrier around it. “And I won’t be here long, most likely. Just long enough to find out a little more about Kounan’s Emperor and his comrades.”

His job done, he turned on his heel, heading back towards the main palace complex, whistling a soft tune under his breath as he sauntered casually towards the innermost chambers. Although he had never been to the palace before, he had seen his father meet with royal representatives in Souen on many occasions, and drawing on that knowledge now, he knew that noone would question his appearance. Despite himself, he found that there was a certain amount of fun in infiltrating a heavily guarded royal palace undetected, and he reflected on the fact that being the only one of Suzaku’s Seishi with developed spiritual senses had its definite advantages.

“The more I know the better.” He decided, reaching one of the big wooden doors and spreading his hands before him as the lock clicked back and the hinges creaked the heavy divides open. “Convenient, you know. Taiitsukun was right. All the things I’ve practiced over the past three years are coming into their own. Who’d have guessed I’d use these powers of mine so naturally — it’s like they’ve become a part of me. It was so hard, the first few times — now I can do all these things almost as easily as I can breathe. I really have shed Hou Jun once and for all. I’ve made myself Chichiri for good, now… noone need know I was ever anything else, and that suits me just fine.”

The hallways of the innermost complex were quiet, with only a few harried clerks running between departments, and noone paid Hou Jun any attention as he made his way purposefully through the many corridors, following the distinctive pulse of Hotohori’s life force as he sought out Kounan’s distinguished Emperor.

“Perhaps it *would* be best to introduce myself properly.” He decided, as he drew nearer. “Rather than play too many tricks on an anointed King. Yes, that might be best. Considering what I saw in Kutou, he should know about it as soon as possible.”

This decided, he set resolutely forward, stopping briefly outside the chamber from which the sensation was strongest. He put his hands to the wood, as if to use his magic to blast them open, then paused, shaking his head ruefully.

“Bad manners to burst in on an Emperor.” He berated himself, knocking gently on the wooden divide instead. “Remember where you are. This isn’t Seisen-mura now, you know.”

“Enter.”

A low-pitched, well-cultured voice called him in, and he gathered his wits, obediently pushing the heavy door back as he stepped into the chamber beyond.

As the outside had suggested, the innermost study of Kounan’s royal palace was a place of both beauty and luxury, coloured in the rich summer reds and golds of Kounan’s protective deity. Everything that adorned the chamber had clearly been crafted by men of repute and skill, and the impression that the chamber gave was that here was the headquarters of a wealthy and powerful ruler.

And yet, as he stepped slowly inside, a different impression touched Hou Jun’s senses. Despite the beauty, there was also austerity, and from the heavy, lingering atmosphere the sorcerer knew that, in spite of its appearance, this room was little more than an elaborately decorated prison for the man who worked inside.

“Yes? Can I help you?” A voice drew his attention to the room’s only occupant, and as Hou Jun met his Emperor’s gaze for the first time, a strange buzz of electricity shot through him, almost paralysing his senses completely. Saihitei was young — younger than even he had realised, yet in his bearing was the grace and deportment of an experienced leader. Despite the fact he could not be older than his late teens, Hou Jun realised that the man who stood before him had a fully adult grasp on his country’s politics, and from the faint flicker of preoccupation in his beautiful gold eyes, it struck him that the Emperor already knew something of the threat posed to his people by Kutou’s movements.

At his sudden silence, Hotohori frowned.

“Did you need me for something?” He asked softly. “I don’t recall sending for someone from the Civil Affairs department… is there some message you wanted to relay to me?”

“Heika… I…” Hou Jun snapped back to the present, berating his distraction as he dropped to his knees before his king. “Forgive my intrusion in this manner, but I…”

He got no further, however, for at that moment the doors at the other end of the chamber were flung back with a crash, and another individual barged through into the room, paying him no attention as they honed in on the Emperor.

“Hotohori-sama, here you are!” The newcomer exclaimed. “Have you been leaving me out of your planning? Tamahome said something

about raiding religious houses — what are you up to?"

"Raiding… religious…?" Hotohori's expression became one of surprise, then confusion. "Nuriko, what are you talking about? I'm in the midst of business — you have to learn to knock!"

He cast a glance across at the still open doors, one of which was hanging dangerously off its hinges, and he sighed, rubbing his temples.

"*And* not to break my doors." He added reprovingly. "I might be the Emperor but I can't afford to keep having parts of my palace fixed because you don't know your own strength."

"You're in a bad mood." The newcomer pouted, and as Hou Jun gathered his wits, he stared at the intruder curiously. Although the individual who stood before them had all the appearance of being a woman, something in the buzz of his life force told Hou Jun that this person was as much a man as either himself or the Emperor, and as he digested that fact, it dawned on him what Hotohori had labelled him.

"Nuriko." He murmured, and at the sound of his name, the oddly dressed stranger turned, seeing him for the first time.

"Who are you?" He asked quizzically, and for a moment Hou Jun thought that he saw a flicker of vague recognition in the man's dark eyes.

"One of the clerks from Civil Affairs." Hotohori said tiredly, before Hou Jun could muster a response. "I told you — I have other business to attend to as well as stellar business."

He turned his attention back to the monk, who knew that his chance to reveal his true identity had gone.

"I apologise." He said softly. "What did you want to report to me?"

"I… I seem to have been the one to intrude on your time, Heika." Hou Jun said hastily. "The matter is not of importance — it… it can surely wait."

With that he withdrew hurriedly from the chamber, closing the doors firmly behind him as he leant up against them, drawing a deep breath into his lungs. He had not been prepared for Nuriko's sudden intrusion, and he berated himself firmly for not having anticipated it sooner.

"I was too focused on the Emperor, and I let my guard down a fraction." He reflected. "Damn it. If it had been Saihitei-sama alone, I might have revealed who I was. But that one… Nuriko… what am I

supposed to do about that? A woman… or a man? A man, I think. No, I'm sure of it. Whatever his appearance, that was a man. And the way he looked at me — as if, somehow, he knew who I was. But he can't, can he? I need to be more careful about what I do. If I'm too casual I might wind up in a lot of trouble. I'm inside a place I have no right to be, after all… and it would be naive to expect my mark to carry me through."

He frowned, glancing around him to make sure he wasn't being observed, then, carefully, he pressed his ear up against the door, listening intently to the conversation inside.

"Now you're scaring off my court officials, Nuriko." That was the Emperor, a faint note of irritation in his voice. "Are you that bored that you can't find anything better to do than burst in on me when I'm trying to make head or tail of this country's running?"

"There's no need to be like that. I didn't mean to scare him." That was Nuriko, and despite the feminine pitch of his voice and the faintly petulant tone in his words, Hou Jun found his resolution that this was a man strengthening. "Besides, he looked at me funny."

"Are you surprised?" Hotohori demanded. "You are dressed like one of the women from my harem, even now."

"Why shouldn't I be?" Nuriko objected. "Nothing has changed, and I like dressing this way. Even if you have more or less kicked me out of your seraglio now you know about my stellar name."

"I would have had to do so in any case, on account of other things." Hotohori said pointedly. "Besides, you wanted to ask me something — what did Tamahome say to you?"

"That you were going to start searching religious communes and so on in the morning, in order to try and find the fourth Seishi." Nuriko responded, and Hou Jun's eyes widened as he realised they were talking about him. "Something about that scroll that Taiitsukun gave you, Heika. Did I misunderstand him? He has been random lately, but he seemed pretty sure about this. It sounds like a fun trip out — are we invited?"

"I wasn't intending to go in person." Came the reply. "And I'd rather you and Tamahome stayed here. I'm making discreet enquiries, that's all. Without Miaka, it's difficult to know how to proceed. But Kutou's actions are concerning me, and…"

"Kutou?" Nuriko sounded surprised, and there was a pause, during which time Hou Jun felt a sense of sadness wash over Hotohori's chi.

“I shouldn’t have said that.” The Emperor admitted. “But yes. They are a more powerful nation than we are, and some of the reports that have been coming from the border… but as yet I don’t have enough forces to mount a military attack in that direction, even if I needed to. I’m hoping it isn’t going to come to that — I’ve dispatched envoys to go and speak to Shoukitei in the Eastern capital and I’m hoping terms can be reached. But in the meantime, I have many things on my mind. Without Miaka, we have to do things for ourselves.”

“I didn’t realise.” Nuriko’s voice sounded suddenly serious. “But I suppose I should have. Being in the seraglio means you don’t get a clear view of the political situation — not when you’re as shunned as we all were by the Emperor, Hotohori-sama. But if Kutou are causing problems, that will affect trade in the city if nothing else, won’t it?”

“And all across Kounan, if it continues.” Hotohori agreed. “Even the rumour of violence is enough to disrupt Kounan’s economy. We’ve lived in such peace for the past few years… the truth is we’re not prepared for anything else. So as much time as I can buy with Kutou’s government the better. By that time, Miaka will hopefully be back. And then we can properly find Suzaku’s people and raise the God.”

He sighed, and Chichiri felt a pang of sympathy for the young Emperor who had so many burdens shadowing his life.

“Without Suzaku no Miko, our positions as Seishi are useless.” He added categorically. “You, me, Tamahome — we all need Miaka in order to do any good by Suzaku’s means. So although I will send out people to the communes tomorrow, it isn’t the main focus of my attention at present. I can’t do anything as Hotohori when Miaka isn’t here. So instead I must act as Saihitei, and do what an Emperor must to protect his people.”

Hou Jun had heard enough. Stepping away from the door, he pursed his lips, digesting everything the Emperor had said.

Hotohori’s words had been true, he realised with a jolt. Had he revealed himself or had he not, the result would have been the same. Without a Priestess, they were unable to wield any real power or resolve Kounan’s problems. Hotohori had realised it, and, as Emperor, had taken steps to do what he could as Kounan’s leader. But in the end, until the Miko returned, they were all at a loose end.

“We all must do what we can do.” Hou Jun decided, glancing at his hands. “Well, and I know where they are, when the time comes. But till Suzaku no Miko returns to Kounan, I should use the knowledge and abilities I have to help where I can, too. Just like the Emperor —

if there's something I can do as myself, then I should do it. Which means… heading back to the Eastern border. And… hopefully… finding a way to stall Kutou's encroaching forces."

He bit his lip.

"But first I'd like to know a little more about that Seishi and whether or not he did pick up my presence. So that means my first port of call is to find out whatever I can about… Nuriko."

Chapter 5

Chapter Four

“Shun’u, aren’t you done with that yet?”

As the cutting voice of his sister Aidou broke through his thoughts, Genrou wheeled around, half-expecting the older girl’s hand to come down hard across the back of his head. He cast her a wary glare, taking a step back as she put her hands on her hips, displeasure sparking in her vivid bronze eyes.

It was going on for a week now since he had been ambushed in the market place by two of his older sisters, and despite his eagerness to get away and pursue a course north, he had not found it as easy as he’d hoped to extricate himself from their attentions. Not that he had been overly surprised, for he knew from long and painful experience that once any of his older siblings had him in their sight, it was difficult to find a good reason to get away. Not for the first time in his seventeen years, Genrou bemoaned the fate of being the only son in a family of six children.

That being said, however, their reason for drawing him back to the Kou farm had been a just one. Despite his protesting, Genrou had observed the shadowy strangers for himself the first night, and as he had watched their movements, he had very quickly realised that whoever they were, they meant some kind of ill will towards the innocent residents of the Eastern Village. Although Hakurou’s condition was still preying on his thoughts, his sense of responsibility to his family was still strong beneath his bandit loyalty, and he knew that if his Kashira had been there to ask, he would have told his young protégé to put his womenfolk first.

And so, with a rueful grimace, Genrou had done just that. His father’s weak and inobtrusive presence was little use in dissuading potential robbers from the Kou property, after all, and although his sisters annoyed him, they were still women who needed his protection.

However, once he had returned to the farm, the usual rules had slipped into play and, far from being able to play the guardian angel, Genrou had found himself with a long list of household chores that needed seeing to. As ever, he reflected grimly to himself, his sisters had got the better of him. Even though only three of the five still lived

at home, when coupled with the formidable power of their mother, Aidou, Rin'an and Manka were a force to be reckoned with, and he had been sorely outnumbered.

Therefore, sunrise had found him in the family's big old barn, fixing recent storm damage to the roof with a bitter heart and a head full of things he knew he didn't dare say out loud. Of all his sisters, Aidou was the hardest task-mistress, and he knew from long and painful experience that no excuse he might find for his slacking would pass muster with her.

"I'm goin' fast as I can." He said now, resentment in his own expression as he faced her head on. "Shit, Oneesan, I ain't your slave, you know. I didn't come down the mountain t'be roped into buildin' you people a new barn or fixin' up the fencin' round the land. That's Pa's job, it ain't mine. I told you when I came that I had other things I needed t'be doin' — an' it's been almost a week since you dragged me back here. If I didn't know better, I'd say you weren't bothered about those guys at all. I'd say it was jus' a way to get your brother back here so you could pile work on him."

"Since you're here, you might as well do your bit." Aidou shrugged her shoulders. "But those men have stayed their distance since they realised there was a man on the farm — so you were needed, after all."

"Pa's here."

"You know well as I do that that's not much use."

"Even so, fixin' the barn wasn't part of the deal." Genrou glanced at his dusty fingers, then up at his sister. "Why are you layin' in to me about it, anyway? I don't even live here any more… cut me some slack, will you?"

"You seem t'be takin' a whole lot of slack already." Aidou's eyes glittered dangerously, and Genrou knew that, as ever, he'd said one word too many in his own defence. "You're as lazy as ever, Shun'u — you'd drive Father up a ladder at his age when he's not half as strong as you are or as capable of reaching all the high spots? Do you think it's enough to just play guard dog an' watch everyone else do the work? Farms don't run themselves, an' an extra pair of hands is always welcome. Since you're here, it makes sense — so don't gripe. This is your family, so it's your responsibility to help out. Ma's said so too. You're the only son, after all. This is where you belong… not playin' huntin' games with those filthy thugs on Reikoku-zan."

"They're not filthy thugs!" Genrou flared up at this. "They're my

buddies — my companions. Shit, they're like my family! I only stopped by here because you said the farm was in danger. I'm in the middle of somethin' important, Aidou… why the hell don't you understand that?"
Thwack!

At this, Aidou's hand came hard and fast across his cheek, startling him into stumbling backwards, and as he rubbed his jaw, staring at his sister in surprise and alarm, Aidou descended on him, rolling back the sleeves of her gown as if preparing to give him another piece of her mind.

"You call those creatures your family, after all the stuff we've done for you?" She demanded, her tones low and dangerous, and somehow even Genrou managed to realise his attempt at explaining had, in the end, only made matters worse. "You're an ungrateful lout, as ever, an' you expect us to feed you an' let you lay about like some King while we do all the hard work? A real man would want to help his sisters out. A real man would look to protect them, when there's noone else to do it."

"Shit, Oneesan, that hurt." Genrou rubbed his jaw again. "If you're so friggin' delicate, you should stop swingin' your right hook at me — I mean it! You'll crack my jaw at this rate, an' then who'd you be naggin' up ladders to fix your barn roofs?"

He glared at her.

"An' if you ask me, you'd scare those strangers off on your own much quicker'n I'd do it." He said frankly. "All you need t'do is come at them like you do me. They'd run screamin' for the hills."

"It's not my job to fight potential intruders. I'm a girl." Aidou said evenly. "You're my brother, so that's different — besides, none of us know what those people are about. Would you really put us in the firing line, without knowing that?"

"Shit, you already know the answer to that." Genrou said bluntly. "I wouldn't be here if it was any other way. I jus' wish you'd let me catch a breath or two. Those guys have kept their distance — an' sure, they're up to no good round these parts, else I would have gone on already. But I can't stay here indefinitely. I have to go North. A friend of mine has a bitch of a fever an' I need to get him a remedy from the North. As it is I'm wastin' time."

"I don't know anythin' about your friend or his fever." Aidou said quietly. "But listen to me, Shun'u. Those guys… one of them… he means more business round here than your stupid thick head has

absorbed."

"You already told me about the things they were askin'." Genrou began, but Aidou shook her head.

"No, idiot. Not that." She said impatiently. "Things a man probably wouldn't see, bein' that he's a man. But one of them… has spent a lot of time round the farm. He's more kept his distance since you came back from market with us, but he's still around. An' he has a hungry look to him… if you catch my meaning."

"Hungry?" Genrou looked non-plussed. "He wants you to feed him?"

"Shun'u!" Aidou exclaimed impatiently, raising her fist as if to strike him, and despite himself Genrou flinched back in anticipation of the blow.

"All right, all right, not that, then!" He said hurriedly, holding up his hands. "So what, then? Spit it out."

"He's been lookin' at Rin'an." Aidou said simply. "In a way a man shouldn't look at a girl he don't know."

"Lookin' at…" Genrou's eyes widened, their bronze colour darkening in anger. "You mean… as in…?"

"Yes." Aidou said flatly. "As if he'd like to take somethin' he can't have from her."

Genrou pursed his lips.

"So that's why Ma kept her in this mornin', an' sent Manka to the well." He said softly. "I didn't get it, but if that's the case…"

"Sometimes you really are dense." Aidou sighed. "But it is. Rin'an's gettin' married in a few weeks, Shun'u. Whether you care about it or you don't is irrelevant. But can you imagine what chaos it could cause if people thought she was attractin' unwanted attention from someone dark an' sinister passin' through the village? An' worse — what if he hurt her? Aside from tarnishin' her honour as a woman — what do you think a guy like that would do, if he decided he wanted her? When a man wants somethin', it ain't easy for a woman to fight him off."

Genrou was silent for a moment, digesting this, and Aidou took her chance to push the point home.

"You don't fight back when I hit you, because you were taught not to hit a girl." She said frankly. "An' whatever else I'll say about you,

you've always taken that to heart. But not all men think that way. There are plenty in this world who'd use a woman then discard her as if she was nothin' more than a toy. An' this man… has a coldness in his eye. He may have asked questions about you, but he's also got his eye on Rin'an. An' until they're gone — none of us on the farm are safe."

"I didn't realise." Genrou's eyes narrowed. "Bastard. He'd better not even think about it. So long as I'm here, noone's goin' to lay fingers on you, or Manka, or Rin'an."

"Which is why we brought you back here, Shun'u."

"All right. I guess I get it." Genrou sighed. "If it's that way, I can't exactly run out an' leave you. But hey, if it's as bad as that, maybe I should just go tackle this guy an' tell him to piss off an' leave my sisters alone. I can be persuasive, ya know. I've learnt a lot of shit since I went up the mountain. I could chase them outta the village for good."

"Noone's asking you to pick a fight." Aidou shook her head. "Think about your family's reputation before you go diving in like some hot-head. Just stick around a while, okay? At least a while longer. Till they've gone of their own accord. Rin'an's fiancé is tradin' with his father in Kahou at the moment. He's not here to protect her — an' you're her brother, so it's down to you."

"Fine." Genrou nodded his head. "But do I really have to do all of Pa's dirty jobs in the meantime?"

"The jobs need doin', regardless of the other circumstances." Aidou said unsympathetically. "Stop moanin' and get workin', will you? It may be hot now but there are storm-clouds on the horizon an' if everything gets soaked in here tonight it's goin' to be a huge headache for all of us when it comes to the morning. You want to prove you're all that tough? Prove it by doing some real work for a change. Gallivantin' round mountain tops waving swords an' swearin' ain't any decent woman's idea of a proper man — you'll never find anyone daft enough to marry you if you carry on like this."

"Who said I was wantin' a wife anyway?" Shun'u shot back, gathering up the remaining planking with very bad grace and stomping across the barn floor to where the ladder lay perched up against the far wall. "After livin' with you an' the others for as long as I did, why in hell would you think I'd want to go near a flamin' woman ever again?"

"Shun'u…" Aidou's eyes glittered again, and Genrou sighed,

shaking his head in defeat.

“All right, all right, already. I get it. Fix the damn roof. I’m goin’.” He said flatly. “But yeesh, Oneesan. You ain’t doin’ yourself any favours in the weddin’ stakes neither, goin’ on like this. Rin’an may have found herself a man who can stand her games, but you’ll scare any potential suitors off actin’ like that. Men don’t like women who shout an’ hit them, or don’t you know that?”

“Men don’t know what’s good for them.” Aidou said crisply. “If you’re anything to go by. Just do your job and shut up complaining, will you? Okaasan’s gone to market and taken Manka with her — Rin’an an’ I have cookin’ to do an’ Pa’s been out in the swelterin’ heat tendin’ the plants all mornin’ so he’s flat out exhausted. When you’re done here you need to head down there an’ take over from him, so stop loiterin’ over it like you’ve all the time in the world, will you? It’ll give you a chance to scour the land for intruders, in any case. Besides, it’s good for you. Some people work to earn their livin’ — it’d be nice if you remembered where you came from an’ did the same.”

“Okay, I get it.” Genrou snapped back. “I’m doing it, okay? I’m fixing the roof. And then I’ll go finish Pa’s work, and check the land for those guys — but dammit, Aidou, I can’t hang around here doin’ your list of odd-jobs forever. I wish you’d let me go tackle those strangers… it’d be a quicker solution an’ I don’t have an endless amount of time to play with. You’ll have to find some other idiot to boss around, soon enough, because I have my friend on the mountain to think of an’ I ain’t goin’ to abandon him either.”

“At least you acknowledge you’re an idiot.” Despite herself, a sardonic smile twitched at Aidou’s lips, and Genrou frowned, eying her in confusion.

“Huh?”

“Never mind.” Aidou rolled her eyes, shaking her head. “Jus’ do as you’re told an’ I’ll make sure you’re fed. That seems to be as much as you can understand, so we’ll leave it there.”

“Go cook. Go do some woman thing and let me be. I’ll do it quicker when you’re not looming over me.” Genrou responded bluntly. “I’m not a kid. I know how to nail planks. And as for those men — you must be crazy if you think I’m goin’ to let them near Rin’an. I know how to deal with troublemakers. You can leave it to me.”

“At least you know something.” Aidou responded archly. “Fine. I’ll leave you to…”

She faltered, her expression changing as she looked at him, and Genrou frowned, sending her a startled look.

“Oneesan?”

“That thing…” Aidou murmured, all the confrontation gone from her tone, and to Genrou’s astonishment, her face had suddenly drained of colour. “Why is it… now… after all this time?”

“Thing? What thing?” Genrou was completely befuddled now, dropping the planks down onto the barn floor as he came to his sister’s side. “Shit, Aidou, you look fit to pass out — what the hell’s up with you? Too much sun or something? Or…?”

“Nothing.” Aidou pushed his hand away, casting him an irritated look. “Nothing. I’m fine. Just… that thing is ugly, and you should cover it up so people don’t have to look at it.”

“What thing are you talking about?” Genrou was genuinely bewildered, and Aidou sighed, thrusting out a hand towards his arm.

“That.” She said emphatically, and Genrou glanced down at himself with a frown. As he did so, he realised what his sister had meant, and he bit his lip, reaching his left hand across to cover the glittering Suzaku mark that shimmered brightly on his right forearm.

“Oh.” He said softly. “That.”

“You ain’t shown it in years.” Aidou’s voice shook slightly, although she was trying to control it, and Genrou couldn’t tell if it was anger or fear that she suppressed beneath her forced calm. “But I wondered why you’d bound up your arm when we saw you in town, and I guess now I know why. It’s ugly. Cover it up, Shun’u. Especially with those guys askin’ questions… noone here wants to see it.”

“It’s damn hot workin’ in here, with my arms covered up an’ all.” Genrou protested. “Those jerks ain’t in the farm right now, an’ only you can see it. It’s not like I’m blazin’ it for the whole village to gawp at — I ain’t any keener than you are to let people in on my Suzaku secret, so get a grip on yourself, will you?”

Aidou shrugged.

“You ain’t comin’ in the house with it glowin’ like that, like some devil’s call sign.” She said firmly. “So cover it up or you ain’t goin’ to eat, Shun’u.”

“It ain’t a devil’s mark, you silly woman. It’s Suzaku’s.” Genrou snapped, and Aidou’s expression darkened.

“I don’t care what it is.” She said slowly. “Ma don’t like it and nor do I. Its all very well sayin’ you’re just on the farm, but you know that if people hereabouts saw it, they’d treat you like some freak an’ you’d not know what hit you, then. Or worse, they might sell you to the highest bidder. Suzaku may have branded you or it might just be some deformity of birth — who really knows for sure? But you ain’t goin’ to flaunt it in this house. We work hard, Shun’u, an’ we all hoe in an’ do our bit. Don’t start thinkin’ you’re special because your arm has that thing burned into it. You ain’t any different from any boy in the village, ‘cept a damn sight lazier. And if you cause us trouble because those men came here lookin’ for you an’ somehow found out that you had that mark, noone would ever forgive you. All right?”

“When did I ever ask for special favours?” Despite himself Genrou was indignant. “Sheesh, Oneesan, lay off me already! I’ll cover it before I come in, I promise. And I don’t ask for it to be there. It just is. Whatever it is… it’s always been there ain’ it ain’t killed me yet.”

Even as he spoke the words, however, he remembered Hakurou’s words on the mountain, and his bronze eyes clouded slightly.

“I know where my place is an’ I’m decided.” He said softly. “I ain’t Suzaku’s anything, Oneesan. I’m Genrou of Reikaku-zan an’ that’s all. Whether you an’ everyone here accepts it or not, I’ve made up my mind. That mark can shimmer there all it wants to. I’m not gonna run out on my comrades when they need me. An’ that’s why I ain’t hangin’ round here longer than I have to, neither. I have to find a remedy for Kashira’s fever, an’ I won’t do that here.”

He retrieved his tools and a couple of planks, clambering up the ladder as he resumed his earlier task.

“I won’t show it Ma.” He added simply. “An’ I won’t let anyone else in the village see either, no matter who they are. So don’t look like that. I know how she feels about it an’ I ain’t gonna forget.”

“Wonders will never cease.” Aidou said acidly, but Genrou was sure he saw relief dance in his sister’s bronze eyes. “Fine then. I’ll leave you to it. Just don’t forget about the plants — if there is a storm coming, we don’t want them washed away. I have to go help Rin’an — try not to make a mess of it, all right?”

With that she was gone, and Genrou sighed, sinking down onto the rung of the ladder as he ran his finger gingerly over the still blazing mark.

“It’s there more and more, these days. More than she realises.” He murmured. “And if those guys are askin’ questions, it’s goin’ to be

harder to keep it concealed."

He rubbed his temples.

"Shit, Kashira can't be right." He whispered. "I'm not anything to do with Suzaku. I want my own life and I've decided — Reikaku-zan needs me an' I'm goin' to be Kashira. This mark… whatever Hakurou-kashira thinks it is, it needs to go away. Let someone else be Suzaku's Tasuki — I've got enough already on my plate!"

"So it is true, after all."

Nuriko sat down heavily in the seat, crossing his legs as he cast his pretty companion a troubled glance. "Houki-chan, you should have told me about this sooner. If I'd known you'd had a letter from home about things getting harder…"

"I didn't want to trouble you when you've got a lot of other things on your plate." The girl called Houki bit her lip, regret flickering in her identical dark eyes as she met her friend's gaze. "Kourin, I'm sorry. If I'd have known that all of this was tied to the trade in the East… but do you think it means war? The letter I had only complained about certain things being more difficult to get, as the borders are being more closely guarded and less and less traders are able to get through. I didn't know that it was as serious as this… true, Kutou are insisting on seeing the papers of anyone trying to enter or exit their country, but… is that so strange?"

"I don't know." Nuriko admitted. "But it's something to think on. If Hotohori-sama is as troubled as he is, there must be more behind it."

"Then I really am sorry I didn't show you this earlier." Houki folded the parchment between her fingers, looking guilty. "If I'd realised it'd have a bearing on your work for Suzaku — speaking of which, Kourin, you've been at the palace a lot lately. Here, even. Not that I mind, but surely you have important things to do now? More important than just talking to me."

"Do you think I'd abandon you, Houki-chan?" A flicker of affection danced in Nuriko's mischievous eyes. "Don't be silly."

"Even so, though…"

"Well, there's not much for a Seishi to do at the moment." Nuriko sighed. "Since we sent Miaka back to her own world, we're all at a loose end."

"I see." Houki frowned. "And she still hasn't come back?"

“No. Not yet.” Nuriko shook his head. “Tamahome’s getting progressively stranger by the day, and his Highness is distracted enough to let slip his political concerns in front of a former harem member, so it’s beginning to be a trial. The silly little glutton’s taking her sweet time coming back here. Taiitsukun seemed convinced that she would come — but when? There’s no way to call her here. It’s all down to her remembering we even exist.”

Houki glanced at her companion for a moment, then her eyes softened and she reached out to brush his hand.

“It hurts, doesn’t it?” She asked softly, and Nuriko’s eyes widened as he stared at the young woman in surprise.

“Hurts?” He asked, confused. “What do you mean, hurts?”

“Saihitei-sama’s preoccupation with this maiden.” Houki said frankly. “You don’t have to hide it from me, Kourin. Of all people in this harem I think I understand your heart better than most. Dare I say, more than anyone in the palace, even? I know your secrets and I know how deep your feelings run. It’s hard, isn’t it, standing before him and accepting his interest in this Miko from the other world?”

A wry smile touched Nuriko’s lips, and slowly he nodded.

“How well you do read me.” He acknowledged. “Yes, Houki. It does bother me. But what can I do about it? The Emperor knows, now, that I’m not like the other members of his harem. I thought it would come to that, if I came out and admitted my identity as Nuriko. But we both knew I had to… there was nothing else for it.”

He sighed, spreading his hands.

“Hotohori-sama is the most beautiful man I’ve ever seen, but it isn’t his beauty that attracts me.” He added sadly. “It’s that loneliness inside of him — that gentle, patient heart that reaches out to try and help his people, even if it means he himself doesn’t get the things he wants. His obsession with Suzaku no Miko has always bothered me, and it’s worse now she’s come and he knows she’s real. But despite that… I think I want her to come back. After all, if she doesn’t… what will that mean for Kounan?”

“Your heart and your loyalties are at odds, then.” Houki observed, and Nuriko shook his head.

“No.” He said gravely. ‘They’re both the same. They’re both in Hotohori-sama’s hands. So long as he wants me by his side in any capacity, I’ll answer his call. At least now, as Nuriko, he knows who I am. His friend, his ally, his comrade in arms — they’re not as much as

I hope for, but I'm also realistic enough to know that some hopes never do become reality. I haven't given up,' As Houki looked surprised. "I don't think a woman ever gives up when there's love in the equation. But, no matter how much I feel for him, I don't think it's going to be returned. I'm a man, after all — and even if he dresses up like a girl sometimes, Hotohori-sama seems decidedly interested in girls."

A rueful look glittered in his dark eyes.

"Ironically, he is in the same position I am." He added. "Miaka-chan has lost her silly head and heart over Tamahome. No matter how much the Emperor tries to win her, I think he'll always lose. And so we go round again, in this hopeless love square that really makes no sense whatsoever."

He shrugged.

"Maybe it's Suzaku's game." He added. "Heaven knows what it'll be like when we add more Seishi to the equation."

Despite herself, Houki giggled at this picture.

"I almost feel sorry for the child." She reflected. "If she has an Emperor and a street fighter vying for her hand already. But she doesn't have your heart, Kourin-chan? You're only loyal to Saihitei-heika and noone else?"

"Well…" Nuriko paused, considering this carefully. At length he laughed, spreading his hands.

"I know I said I was resolved to hate her, and if I could, to make her life hell." He admitted. "But the truth is, I'm becoming sort of fond of her. She can't help it if Hotohori-sama is in love with her — she hasn't asked him to be, and I've watched her mooning over Tamahome enough to know those feelings are more real. The girl is a silly, greedy idiot — but she's a forgiving, good-natured idiot. No, the truth is, Houki, I miss her too. Not in the same way they do, perhaps… but I miss her. And I hope she'll be back soon. Life became more interesting when Miaka came to Kounan, that's for sure."

"Then I'm sorry I can't meet her." Houki reflected. "But even when she is here, Suzaku no Miko has far too much to do without worrying about Imperial consorts."

"True, sadly." Nuriko acknowledged. "But the same doesn't go for me. Even when she is back, I won't abandon you, Houki — even if the only way is by letter, I'll definitely make sure you're not forgotten."

“I’m glad of that.” Houki’s dark eyes glimmered with relief. “I miss you, but I’m also glad you answered Suzaku’s call. I don’t know if it really will mean war with Kutou, Kourin, but if it does, at least we have Suzaku no Miko and her Seishi to fall back on for help. If this is the thing which threatens Kounan then this is the reason you were born. And that’s more important now than anything else.”

“Houki-sama?”

At that moment, one of the harem maids appeared at the doorway, her eyes opening wide with surprise as she registered Nuriko’s presence.

“K… Kourin-sama? You… are here too? But I thought…”

“It’s all right, Meichi. I’m going now.” Nuriko assured the girl, offering her a smile as the maid trailed off, confused. “I was just paying a visit to my friend — I won’t get in the way of your duties, don’t worry.”

He cast the young girl a wink.

“After all, since I’ve been booted out of the harem, I shouldn’t be here at all, should I?” He added.

He turned to Houki, offering her a grin.

“I’ll be in touch, Houki-chan. Wish me luck — even when Miaka is back, I’m sure to need it!”

With which parting sally he exited the harem chamber, stepping out into the bright Kounan sunlight as he reflected on their conversation. Houki had been his closest friend in the harem and the only one in whom he had confided all of his secrets, so it had been somewhat soothing to his troubled heart to speak to her again. Yet the information contained in her letter from her home village also concerned him, and he frowned, wondering if his ally had hit the nail on the head. Despite her retiring nature and shy countenance, Houki was both intelligent and perceptive, and the more he thought on it, the more he decided the girl was probably right.

“Kutou is the reason we’re here… Hotohori-sama, Tamahome, me and even Miaka, when she comes back.” He murmured. “I wonder… if I was to head into the city, whether I’d find out anything more. Hotohori-sama’s reluctant to divulge too much political information to us at the moment — as he said, till Miaka comes back, we can each only do what we can as individuals and not as Shichi Seishi. But… that aside…”

He shrugged his shoulders.

“What will be will be.” He reflected. “If that is it, then we’ll just have to find a way to stop it.”

He cast a glance across the grounds, catching sight of a familiar form lounging up against the fencing that surrounded the sheltered verandah, and his brows knitted together as he registered the tension in the man’s form.

“Tama-chan.” He murmured. “What are you thinking?”

He sauntered across the grounds, heavy skirts trailing slightly in the dust as he made his way to where his companion was. Tamahome paid him no attention, however, his gazed fixed sightlessly on some unknown horizon, and as he drew closer, Nuriko realised that wherever the Seishi was physically, mentally he was a million miles away.

“Tama-chan?” He called softly, but there was no response. Nuriko’s brows knitted together in irritation.

“Hey, Tamahome — wake up and listen to me, will you?” He demanded. Again, Tamahome made no indication that he’d heard, and Nuriko sighed, marching across the verandah and grabbing his comrade firmly by the arm. As he was forcibly yanked from the railing, Tamahome let out a yell of surprise, almost toppling over as he struggled to get his footing, and Nuriko tut-tutted under his breath.

“Where are you, Tama-chan?” He asked playfully. “Certainly not in Kounan, with that look on your face.”

“What the hell are you playing at, you mad transvestite?” Anger sparked in Tamahome’s violet eyes as he struggled to gather the scattered shards of his composure. “Are you trying to give me a heart attack, sneaking up on me like that?”

“I called your name twice.” Nuriko objected. “What else was I meant to do, since you weren’t listening to me?”

“You did?” Tamahome looked startled, and Nuriko nodded.

“You were lost in some world of your own.” He agreed. “Let me guess… you were thinking of Miaka.”

A mixture of irritation and embarrassment flooded Tamahome’s expression, and Nuriko laughed, nodding his head in satisfaction.

“I thought so. You really are a fool, aren’t you? I told you you were in love with her — why didn’t you listen to Nuriko-neechan’s advice?”

“Neechan?” Tamahome snorted. “Quit it. That’s wrong on so many levels — let’s not even start down that path.”

“But I did tell you.” Nuriko was unmoved. “Stupid as she is, Tama, she managed to tell you her feelings. Now she’s a world away from us — literally — and you’ve only just realised yours. I’m right, aren’t I? You’re in love with her — only she’s not here to tell.”

Tamahome was silent, and Nuriko sighed.

“Fine. Keep it to yourself.” He said resignedly. “But spacing out around the palace isn’t particularly productive, you know. Why not come into the city with me? I’m getting claustrophobic, tied up here all the time… and it’d do you good.”

“No… it’s all right.” Tamahome shook his head. “If Miaka does come back, she’ll come back here. And I’ll be waiting for her where she can easily find me.”

“Riight.” Nuriko looked amused. “Well, whatever you think is best. If Hotohori-sama asks where I am, try and remember that I’ve gone into Eiyou, will you?”

“I’m not stupid… I can do that.”

“Well, on current evidence I’m surprised you even know your name.” Nuriko said witheringly. “Don’t stand here too long, Tama, or a bird might mistake you for a tree and build a nest in your hair.”

“Haha, you’re very funny.”

“Well, don’t blame me if it happens. I did warn you.” Nuriko returned neatly. “I’ll see you later — if you haven’t pined away to nothing by that point, of course.”

“Nuriko…”

As Nuriko made to leave, Tamahome called him back and he turned, eying his fellow Seishi quizzically.

“Yes?”

“You’re in love with Hotohori-sama, aren’t you?”

“You know the answer to that. Why?”

“Even though you’re a guy, you still really are?”

“Yes, Tama. I told you. Love has nothing to do with gender… I really do love him.”

“Does it bother you, seeing him with Miaka?”

“Another stupid question. Of course it does.” Nuriko tut-tutted. “So that’s it. You’re afraid you’re being upstaged by an Emperor.”

“I didn’t say that! I was just clarifying something for myself.” Tamahome protested, and Nuriko laughed.

“You *are* jealous of Hotohori-sama.” He observed. “And I won’t pretend I’m not jealous of Miaka, taking his attention. But you’re luckier than I am, Tama-chan. Miaka is in love with *you* — not Hotohori-sama. I doubt anything will change that. You’ll just have to tell her how you feel, when she comes back. If you’d done that earlier, you wouldn’t feel like you do now — but you’ll probably have another chance to make her understand.”

He shrugged carelessly.

“It’s not so easy for me.” He added lightly. “But I’m strong and I can handle it. I’m close to him, and it helps. Besides, when Miaka turns him down, someone will have to comfort him… and I’ll be there, no matter what.”

“You’re really a strange one, you know that?” Tamahome eyed his companion thoughtfully, and Nuriko nodded.

“I know.” He agreed. “But I’m Suzaku’s Seishi, aren’t I? If I followed the crowd, what use would I be to anyone?”

He winked, raising his hand in a wave.

“Later, Tama. Think about what I said, okay? I’m serious — if you can’t admit to yourself how you feel, you’ll never claim Miaka from his Highness, and that suits neither one of us.”

Chapter 6

Chapter Five

"I still don't see why it is I had to come along."

Genrou kicked his heels bad-temperedly along the dirt pathway, pausing to cast his middle sister a dark look. As ever, Rin'an was the picture of innocence, her gentle countenance betrayed only by the faint twinkle of mischief that glittered deep in her bronze-gold eyes. As a small boy, Genrou had learnt to dread this particular glint, for it had been a forewarning of some practical joke or game to come, and even now, as a grown man it put him on edge, wondering what exactly had been behind the older girl's request for him to come into the city.

"I have other things to do." He continued now, at Rin'an's lack of response. "You could at least tell me what's so important. An' what you're goin' to make me do. We both know there's somethin', so you might as well spill it now… what do I have to fix, carry or run round after this time?"

"You're such a suspicious person these days, Shun'u." This time Rin'an turned to glance at him, a playful smile dancing on her lips as she eyed him fondly. "It doesn't suit you, you know, being so wary. What would I do to you? You're my little brother — why would you think I'd have an ulterior motive? Maybe I just miss your company."

"Yeah, I'm sure." Genrou muttered. "If so, it'll be the first time."

"Your bandits have taught you horrible manners." Rin'an pouted. "Ma'd throw a fit if she could hear you."

"Well, then spill it." Genrou said frankly. "Why am I comin' into Souun with you?"

"I thought Aidou explained it to you already?" Despite herself, Rin'an frowned. "Didn't she? Or are you too stupid to have made the connection? Ma ain't lettin' me go anywhere on my own at the moment. Everyone else is busy, so I have to take you with me into Souun. It's not a picnic for me either, Shun'u-kun. No girl wants to be trailing round town with her little brother when she has a fiancé on his way back from Kahou any day now. But that's how it is, so that's how it is."

She raised an eyebrow.

“Aidou *did* tell you…?”

“About those guys?” Genrou’s brows knitted together, and he nodded. “Yeah. She did.”

“So then you know the reason why already, don’t you?”

“I guess.” Genrou pursed his lips, glancing up at the wisps of cloud that dotted the sky overhead. “Say, Rin’an — do you really think that’s what they’re about? Everyone I’ve spoken to who’s seen them says they’ve been askin’ about Suzaku. Noone’s said anythin’ about *you*.”

“Ma’s said we’re not to talk about *that* in public.” Rin’an said sharply, her gaze going almost automatically to Genrou’s bound arm. “At least you had the sense to keep it covered to come out — but she’s right, too. If they get suspicious o’ you, we’ll all be in a lot more trouble. Whoever they are, they’re creepy an’ we don’t want their kind near the farm. So shut your yap, all right? Whatever they’ve been askin’ questions about, it don’t concern us.”

“That didn’t answer my question.” Genrou pointed out, and Rin’an sighed, spreading her hands.

“I don’t know.” She said evenly. “I think Ma an’ Aidou are takin’ it too seriously. I mean, it ain’t the first time a guy’s asked after me. It’s not strange for them to be interested in a pretty girl.”

“Pretty? *You*?” Genrou stared at her, and Rin’an scowled, cuffing him sharply across the ear.

“Shut up.” She snapped. “Just because you’re my brother doesn’t mean you can be rude. I *am* pretty, you know. Just because you don’t see it doesn’t make it a lie. You’re stupid where girls are concerned, in any case. You wouldn’t know ‘pretty’ if it jumped up an’ bit you.”

“It probably would, an’ all.” Genrou muttered. “If it was a girl.”

Rin’an snorted, shaking her head in resigned amusement.

“You’ll break Ma’s heart all over again at this rate.” She reflected. “You know that she hopes you’ll outgrow this bandit rebellion phase an’ come back to the farm. Find a wife, settle down an’ take over the runnin’ for Pa. At this rate she’ll be disappointed, won’t she? You’re already seventeen an’ you still sound like a little boy from time to time.”

“She’ll be waitin’ a damn long time.” Genrou said frankly. “I ain’t

goin' to be a farmer. I'm a bandit. Why does noone listen to me when I say that?"

"Because it's stupid." Rin'an said bluntly. "Boys games with swords. That's all."

Genrou snorted, but at the glitter in Rin'an's eyes he refrained from retorting, merely pulling a face in her direction. Rin'an smirked.

"As I said. You're still a little boy." She observed. "But I suppose you bein' on the farm has kept strangers at a distance, so so much to the good."

"They'll move on soon enough, probably." Genrou responded. "An' so will I. Even movin' as quickly as I can, it'll take me a coupl'a days to reach the Shouryuu an' even when I get there I don't know exactly what I'm lookin' for. Kashira's strong, but even he can't fight a fever like this forever. I'm wastin' time hangin' around here."

"So why are you?" Rin'an fixed him with a piercing gaze. "If you care so much about your Kashira, why *are* you still loitering round the farm?"

Genrou's expression became one of resignation.

"What the hell else d'you expect me to do?" He asked simply. "I don't like it, but if those people are causin' you folk hassle…"

"Aw, you do care about us after all, Shun-chan." Rin'an laughed, humour sparkling in her eyes as she reached out a playful hand to pinch his cheek. He shied away, giving her a rough shove as he glared at her.

"What the hell are you doing now, you idiot?" He demanded. "Stop it already, or I'll take off for the river today an' damn you all to hell!"

"Now, now." Rin'an scolded, and Genrou could tell his mischievous elder sister was enjoying every minute of his discomfort. "If a sister can't tease her brother, who can she tease?"

"Try one of your other sisters an' give me a breather." Genrou snapped. "I'm sick o' bein' outnumbered. If Ma an' Pa had had at least one more son it would've been somethin' — why the hell did you all have to be girls anyway?"

"If you come to it, you would've made a pretty girl yourself." Rin'an eyed him speculatively, and despite himself Genrou took a step away from her. "Maybe it's just *you* that was born wrong — did you think of that?"

She chuckled, a tinkling peal of laughter that told Genrou that once again he'd lost.

"After all, we all know how cute you used to look, when Fuyou played dress-up…" She continued meaningfully.

"Shut up." Genrou's cheeks blazed red. "I'm serious, Neechan. You stop it or I'm goin'. Strangers or not, I'm not goin' to be the butt of your jokes when I've got other things I should be doin'. We'll go to market, we'll get the things Ma wants an' then we're goin' back to the farm. No tricks, no jokes an' no more pickin' on Genrou. All right? Things are different now. I'm not just there for your amusement."

"You're no fun." Rin'an tut-tutted under her breath. "Fine. If that's how you feel… that's what we'll do. But you really are becoming stiff and sulky in your old age, Shun-chan. It's not attractive."

Genrou opened his mouth to retort, but as he did so, he registered the fact his sister had stopped dead in her tracks and the words died on his lips as he turned to cast her a bewildered look. Her teasing expression had become a more troubled one all of a sudden, and as he followed her line of sight, he caught a brief glimpse of something dark darting into the trees that flanked the path. His eyes narrowed, his fingers straying to his sword hilt almost automatically.

"You saw it too, huh?" At his movement, Rin'an cast him a questioning look, and Genrou nodded his head grimly.

"Someone's trackin' us comin' this way." He agreed. "It's all right, Neechan. I ain't goin' to let anything happen."

Rin'an sighed.

"I thought maybe they'd got bored already." She admitted. "Not finding what they were after in the village… I thought they'd have moved on. But…"

"I guess you were wrong." Genrou pursed his lips. "An' maybe Aidou was more right than either of us thought."

"Don't tell her that." Rin'an grimaced, rolling her eyes. "I'll never live it down, if you do."

Genrou simply sent her a rueful smile, tightening his grip around the hilt of his blade.

"All right, whoever you are, come show yourself!" He exclaimed. "I ain't playin' games so if you want somethin', come out an' state it openly!"

At first there was no response, but then, as softly as a shadow, a figure emerged from the path ahead as he met Genrou's gaze with a calm one of his own. At the sight of him, Genrou's brows knitted together and he took an instinctive step forward, shielding his sister with his body.

"Who are you an' what do you want?" He demanded. "Why have you been hanging around my village — what do you want with the people there?"

"Village people?" The man twitched an eyebrow up, a derisive expression touching his thin, sallow features, and he laughed. "Why would I be at all interested in common village folk? You are ahead of yourself, boy… and carrying a weapon that you don't look old enough to wield."

"That's my business." Genrou said stiffly, longing to pull the blade from it's scabbard but all too aware that if he did, it would be hard to protect Rin'an from the fight that might ensue. The man did not seem threatening in his demeanour or his build, yet there was something in his eyes which reminded Genrou of some of Kaou-zan's darker souls, and for once he did not charge blindly into battle, instead holding back as he tried to read the stranger's intentions.

A pause followed, and then the stranger took a pace or two forward, stopping a matter of feet away.

"Don't even think about coming near my sister." Genrou warned. "I can use this, no matter what you think, and if you touch her I'll slit your throat for you."

"Your sister?" The stranger glanced from Rin'an to the hot-headed bandit, interest glimmering in his gaze. "I see. So you're playing the protective guardian, are you?"

He laughed, shrugging his shoulders as he cast Rin'an a second glance, a faint glimmer of something suggestive in his cold gaze. "She's pretty enough, I won't dispute it. But she's nothing more than a farmer's girl to me. I have other things to pursue at present."

"Other things?" Genrou repeated, suddenly aware of the buzzing, throbbing warmth of his Suzaku mark burning against his skin. He bit his lip, resisting the urge to glance down at his bandaged forearm, and inwardly thanking the stars that he'd taken the time to properly wrap it before they had left the farm. "Such as what? You said it. This is jus' a farming village. People don't like strangers an' intruders into their business. So you'd do better goin' someplace else."

His eyes glittered slightly.

“If you’re wantin’ a woman, there are brothels in Souun.” He said meaningfully. “But the girls in the Eastern Village don’t ply that trade.”

“Damn right we don’t.” Rin’an put in her bit at that point, scorn in her tone. “As if we’d descend to those kind of depths. We have standards, you know.”

“Shut up, wench.” The man said coolly. “I didn’t ask your opinion. I’m not interested in you. I want to speak to your brother.”

“Don’t talk like that to her.” Genrou reacted angrily, but Rin’an put a hand on his arm, shaking her head.

“Don’t rise to him.” She advised. “Ma’ll skin you if you get violent this close t’the village, where anyone might see you.”

“Dammit, Rin’an, I’m not playin’ boy’s games with outsider scum like this.” Genrou told her frankly. “If he pisses me off, dammit, I’ll make him sorry he crossed me. I stuck around to make sure none of them gave you girls any trouble — well, now it’s my chance to tell him so face to face. You hear that, whoever you are?”

He turned back to the interloper, bronze eyes blazing with resolution.

“I’ll speak for anyone who lays a finger on any of the people in my village.” He said darkly. “So you’ve been told. An’ now you know.”

“You talk big for someone who’s barely out of his cradle.” The dark-clad man spoke smoothly, not noticeably bothered by Genrou’s words. “But I don’t want to fight with you. I just want to ask you something.”

“Then ask it, and get lost.” Genrou snapped. The man laughed, spreading his hands.

“Very well.” He said softly. “I’ve been given an Imperial commission to scour the country in order to locate the warriors blessed by Suzaku. There are several stories in these parts about the existence of such people and my duty is to track them down. All of them. One by one.”

“Imperial… commission?” Rin’an stared, despite herself, and Genrou frowned.

“You’re sayin’ you’ve come from *Eiyou*?” He demanded, and the man twisted his bloodless lips into a faint, humourless smile.

“I’ve told you all I’m able.” He said evenly, sliding his hand into the folds of his cape as he pulled out a purse heavy with money. “Except to say that anyone with information on the Chosen of Suzaku will benefit… in certain fiscal ways.”

His smile widened.

“This is a poor area, and the village you’re so proud of is run-down and insignificant.” He added. “It would be in your best interests, if you knew anything, to tell us and allow us to complete our task.”

Genrou eyed him for a moment, dislike stirring in his heart.

“Village people have pride.” He said stiffly. “They can’t be bought. Besides, you’re lookin’ in the wrong place. Like you said, the village ain’t the kind of place you’d notice. None of Suzaku’s whatever you called them are goin’ to be seen dead in a place like this. Or are you too stupid to figure that out?”

“I see.” The stranger pursed his lips, then nodded his head, slipping the money back into his cape as he cast Rin’an a final, lingering glance. “Doubtless you are right. Doubtless the village has its own distinct treasures — but nothing so precious as a blessed soul of Suzaku.”

“As you say.” Genrou retorted coldly, brushing his fingers once more against the hilt of his blade to hammer home his point. “None of Suzaku’s people live in this village, so you might as well move on someplace else. Whether you’re from the Emperor in Eiyou or the demons in hell, there ain’t nothin’ any of us can do to help you. An’ whatever bribe you’re offerin’, you’re wavin’ it in front of the wrong people. There ain’t anything we can tell you, so get lost already an’ let people get back to their ordinary lives.”

With that he grabbed Rin’an by the arm.

“We’re goin’ back to the farm.” He added. “If Ma wants to yell because we’re out of rice or some shit, she can yell at me. I don’t care. We’re goin’ no further today.”

Rin’an eyed him for a moment, then she nodded her head.

“I agree.” She said, surprising him with her compliance. “Somehow I don’t feel like a walk either, any more.”

At their unfriendliness, the stranger laughed, cold amusement in his eyes.

“I’ve upset you.” He said, no sign of repentance in his tone. “Well. I suppose we’ll just have to continue our search elsewhere.”

With that he was gone, melting into the undergrowth as silently as he had come, and Genrou frowned.

“Bastard.” He muttered. “I could’ve had him, if he’d come at me — at least if he had I’d have had a good reason to draw my blade.”

“Ma wouldn’t like it, if you did.” Rin’an warned. “She only let you take it with you today because you were comin’ with me an’ she thought there might be trouble.”

“An’ there was.” Genrou murmured. “But at least now maybe they’ll move on. If they think they can buy secrets from the village…”

“Things ain’t been easy of late.” Rin’an looked uncharacteristically troubled. “Prices are risin’ and some families are strugglin’ more than they ought. I don’t know, Shun’u. You ain’t been here to see it, but I think there are some families as would tell them if they knew anythin’, just to guarantee food for their kids.”

Genrou stared at her, surprised, and Rin’an shrugged.

“You’ve had your head in the clouds chasin’ wolves.” She said frankly. “But the reality isn’t Reikaku-zan or bandit alliances. The reality is survival in a place like this — an’ if prices continue to go up, even we might find ourselves in trouble.”

“Then when I go back to the mountain, I’ll see if there’s somethin’ there we can do about it.” Genrou said firmly. “But for today, we’re goin’ home. If there’s stuff to get from market, well, I’ll go myself later on. Still, if he doesn’t think we can be bought, that jerk probably won’t come back. It *was* Suzaku he wanted after all… and he won’t get any help from us on that subject.”

He glanced back briefly in the direction the shadowy figure had disappeared, then shrugged.

“After all, there’s nothin’ for the likes of him here.”

Eiyou was busy that afternoon and, as Nuriko slipped along the crowded walkways, he cast a glance across at the street vendors who were doing their best to ply their trade. Although they were as boisterous and determined in their sales pitch as ever, Nuriko’s sharp eyes soon picked up on the limited nature of their wares and he frowned, reflecting once more on what Houki had told him. As the middle child of an important textile-trading Eiyou family, Nuriko had grown up with the world of big business not far from his bedroom door and, although it would be his elder brother Rokou on whom the burden of inheritance would one day fall, his own quick wits had soon

grasped the basics of his father's trade.

"If supplies don't come, sales are more difficult because orders can't be completed and deadlines can't be met." He ruminated, as he stepped back to let a couple of ragamuffin children dart past, laughing and teasing as they chased a ball into the side streets. "Prices have gone up even for basic things like rice and bread. It'll have a knock on effect all over — I wonder if even Father's been affected by all of this."

He tut-tutted under his breath.

"Hotohori-sama must have his work cut out for him, if even trade in Eiyou is beginning to wane."

"R… Ryuuen?"

As he pushed onward through the swirling crowds of market-goers, a tentative voice caught his ear and his heart froze in her chest as he turned to meet a pair of eyes almost mirror images to his own. He bit his lip, stepping back against the sturdy wall of a building as the young man advanced, a mixture of relief and anxiety crossing his features.

"It *is* you." he murmured, and the fervent nature of his words told the disconcerted Nuriko that his companion had spent some time looking. "When I heard… people had been saying that the third of Suzaku's warriors had been found, I knew that I'd see you. I've been searching since then — Ryuuen, it feels like it's been forever since the last time we spoke."

Nuriko's expression became guarded, and he cast an apprehensive glance around him before grabbing the young man firmly by the arm, dragging him forcibly into the side-alley that the two children had earlier disappeared into. Now out of the view of the crowd, he cast his companion a troubled glance.

"Aniki." He murmured, resignation in his expression. "Tell me that you're joking? You haven't been wandering around the streets of Eiyou just in the hope of seeing me, surely? What about the shop — what about Mother and Father and the clothes emporium? Surely now more than ever they need your help, if all these restrictions on trade are really falling so heavily on everyone these days. Did you just flake out on them, on the off-chance that you might encounter me in a deserted stretch of the city?"

The young man dropped his gaze, looking folorn and shamed by his brother's impatience, and despite himself, Nuriko sighed.

“Why, Rokou?” He asked softly. “I don’t understand. Why *now*? It’s been almost a year since last we spoke. Why are you so determined to see me, even after you know that I’ve announced myself to the world and I’m bound by Kounan’s legend? Surely you couldn’t have been that surprised — ever since I was small, didn’t everyone say that this would one day be my calling? That’s why Mother and Father were so glad I was the second child — that they already had a son to pass their business to, even when I was gone.”

He eyed Rokou pensively, then,

“And here you are running the streets of the capital looking for Suzaku spirits when you could be lending a hand towards your *own* destiny.”

“I told you — I was looking for you.”

“But why, dammit?” Nuriko’s brows knitted together. “Why do you care so much? I don’t live at home — or even visit it, these days. Why would it matter so much what I did?”

“Because you’re my brother, and that’s reason enough, isn’t it?” Rokou raised plaintive eyes to his companion’s, and inwardly Nuriko flinched at the look of sorrow hidden in their depths. “Mother and father… they don’t even know where you are, or what you… what you’ve become. But I do. You know that I… I saw you, when you entered the city. You know that I knew you’d gone to the Emperor, and that the reasons weren’t Suzaku’s. You know full well that I saw you that day and I realised that R… Ryuuen was never going to be coming home again.”

He grasped him loosely around the wrists, gazing at him earnestly.

“But even so, I wanted to see you again. My little brother — I miss you, and the family needs you. We always have.”

“And as I just said, the family has *you* to inherit and to run the business. That was always the intention, no matter what happened to me.” Nuriko detatched himself from his grip, glaring at him as he did so. “You’re a man, Rokou, aren’t you? Hell, you’re older than me. You don’t need me to fix all your problems or run round after you. I was fated for Suzaku from the moment I was born — do you really think I’d abandon his Highness in order to rescue my weak-spined brother from his responsibilities?”

“Ryuuen!”

“*Don’t call me that*!” Anger sparked in Nuriko’s heart and he swiped his brother’s extended hand away, shaking his head. “Ryuuen is dead.

He's gone. He's no longer a part of anything. I'm Kourin, I'm Nuriko. But *not* Ryuuen. Do you understand me? Never, *ever* call me Ryuuen — and *especially* not in public — again! Ever!"

Rokou was silent for a moment, gazing at his hands as he digested his companion's words.

"You are my brother." He said eventually. "No matter how you dress or what you say, you are my little brother. *Not* my sister. *Kourin*was my sister, and if I called you by her name, it would mean I'd forgotten who she really was. The truth is that you are *not* her. Even if you pretend to be, and break our parents' hearts by doing it — you'll never be her."

He frowned, his eyes clouding, and somehow Nuriko felt guilty that his appearance had become so flawlessly feminine.

"I loved Kourin too." Rokou said at length. "Not just you. I can accept who you've become and what your choices are — even if they are difficult to face, I understand why you feel that way. But Kourin was my sister as well as yours. Don't ask me to use that name to address you because I won't do it. My sister was my sister. You are my brother. There's no changing either thing. No matter what you wear or how you act — to me you will always be Ryuuen."

Nuriko bit his lip, feeling ashamed.

"I'm sorry." He murmured. "I suppose you're right. Kourin was your sister too. But even so… I'm not Ryuuen any more."

"Well, at least now I can tell Mother and Father that it *is* true and you *have* accepted your destiny." Rokou said evenly. "They *are* proud of you, my brother. Now that they know that Nuriko has revealed himself as an ally of the Emperor, they are full of pride that you've lived up to the responsibility you were born to face. But they are sad too, you know. Do you really intend to sever yourself completely from your heritage? From the Chou family and everything you were born into?"

Nuriko leant back against the wall, eying his companion in consternation as she took in the all too ready tears that lingered in her older brother's eyes. She sighed heavily, slowly shaking her head.

"To myself, I don't feel like Chou Ryuuen any more. That's all." He said slowly. "And the Chou family don't see me as anyone else, so it makes it harder. Besides, it's not about you, or Mother, or Father. It's not really about my family or my home. I had a destiny to follow, and I followed it. Going to the mountains to stay with our uncle was my

rite of passage — my test to see whether or not I would be ready if and when the call came. I… I did what I had to do, to get to where I needed to be. All of this — all of these things, they've been for a purpose beyond anything to do with the Chou family or the world I grew up in. To be one of Suzaku's warriors I had to return to Eiyou and become an ally of his Highness. That's what I've done… so don't you dare cry about it! I told you, I'm Nuriko now. Nuriko. The one I was always going to be, Aniki. Even before Kourin was born."

"I know that." Rokou sighed, and Nuriko thought she saw a brief flicker of acceptance cross his face. "But even though you say it's hard for you, I really can't call you Kourin. I lost Kourin already. If I stop calling you Ryuuen, it's like I've lost you as well — and I don't want that. You're the brother who always saved me from tight situations, and always defended me from bullies and troublemakers when we were still small. I *can't* see you as anything else. It's just the way things are."

Nuriko eyed his brother for a moment, sadness crossing his expression. Then, slowly, he nodded.

"I suppose I understand." He said frankly. "You always did rely on me too much, Rokou. And you're going to have to rely on yourself now, because I won't fight your battles for you any more. I have to fight Kounan's — I have to help the Emperor to defend this country, and use the strength I was given to do that, not settle disputes among children. So go home to Mother and Father, tell them that I'm well and that I'm following the path they always knew that I would. They'll have enough to deal with as time goes on without worrying about me, I'm sure. I won't shame them, you know. Even if my dressing this way makes them feel uncomfortable, I will still make them proud of me, one way or another."

"I told you already that they are proud of you, otouto-kun." Rokou looked very much like he might cry again, and Nuriko sighed, then hugged his brother tightly.

"You're a fool, just as you always were." He said lightly. "Don't be so silly. We all always knew one day I'd have to fight in defence of my country."

"But can a *woman* protect Kounan?" Rokou looked doubtful. "Brother, can you really be a warrior of Suzaku dressed as a lady of his Highness's court?"

"Suzaku no Miko is a woman, and everyone calls her Kounan's saviour even before she's lifted a finger." Nuriko said matter-of-factly.

“Yes, Aniki, I think a woman can protect Kounan. Besides, I’m no ordinary woman. And I’m going to make sure that everyone around me is fully aware of that fact.”

He paused for a moment, eying his companion keenly.

“You knew I was with the Imperial harem all this time, but you didn’t tell Mother or Father?” He asked softly. Rokou shook his head.

“They wouldn’t have understood. Even *I* don’t fully understand.” He admitted. “So I told them I’d seen you, going to the palace to train to be Nuriko. Now your presence has become common knowledge, they’re comforted, and they have faith in you. They no longer have to make excuses, or explain things to other people.”

“Well, Aniki, maybe there’s hope for you yet.” Despite himself, Nuriko’s eyes danced. “Perhaps you *do* have a spirit of your own somewhere inside that great, soft-centred body of yours. What do you think?”

“Ryuuen.” Rokou shook his head impatiently. “I might never see you again, you know, and you’re joking with me as if we were still carefree children?”

“Might never see me again?” Nuriko pursed his lips. “Have you no faith in me at all, then, to fight my battles bravely and come out triumphant at the end?”

“I know you can, and I know you will.” Rokou said, his voice shaking slightly. “But you… this is your destiny, and… and… for Kounan and his Majesty, you must…”

“Yes. I must be willing to give my life.” Nuriko agreed gravely. “And for the Emperor, Rokou-nii, I would give anything and everything I had. To serve him, to please him, to die in his name… I am ready to make that sacrifice, if it should be asked of me. Don’t worry about me. My courage hasn’t failed me yet, and I’m sure that it won’t. I’m Nuriko for a reason, whatever that reason proves to be. And I’m not afraid to face it, if the time comes.”

“I don’t want to lose you like I lost Kourin.” Rokou admitted in a small voice, and Nuriko sighed, shaking his head impatiently.

“You *can’t* rely on me any more. I already have too many people who do… and too many unsettled pasts and futures to make into one whole being.” He said cryptically, as an image of his younger sister flitted before his gaze. “Babysitting Suzaku no Miko is going to turn out to be a full time job at this rate, too. Stop it, Rokou. This is pointless. Go back to the shop and tell Mother and Father my message.

All right? Then when Kounan is saved, I'll come to the shop myself and you'll see who your brother has become in the service of his country. All right?"

He lifted a hand, cuffing his companion playfully across the head. Rokou sprawled, grabbing out for something to steady his fall and despite himself, Nuriko laughed.

"I'm still too strong for you, aren't I." He reflected mischievously. "Never mind… you have some time now, Aniki, to muster your own strength."

He frowned, glancing up at the sky as he registered the position of the sun and realised that the afternoon was drawing on.

"I should go." He said briskly. "Duty calls. After all, as Tama says, if that brat turns up back in Kounan, it'll probably be at the palace and I shouldn't be wasting time here."

"Ryuuen?" Rokou looked confused, and Nuriko grinned.

"Nothing at all." He assured his brother. "And if you must refer to me by any name, Aniki, call me *Nuriko*. I told you — I'm not Ryuuen any more, and I never will be again. Ryuuen is really gone, now, this time for good. So call me Nuriko, at least when in a place like this. If you seek to shield Mother and Father from the shame of further acknowledging their son as a cross-dresser, you should think carefully about how much you bandy my true name around. People may have forgotten me and my strange ways, since I've been away from Eiyou and the shop, but they can easily remember — and then your attempts will have been in vain."

A rueful, wry look touched his face.

"Imagine Father's face if he knew his second son was a member of the Imperial harem." He added evenly. "Even you've kept that news from them — don't ruin it now, all right?"

He touched him gently on the cheek for a moment, then, before he could respond, she was off across the city in the direction of the palace once more. He did not turn back, but he knew that if he had done, his brother would have been still standing there, staring after him in bewilderment and confusion as he tried to work out what to do next. Inwardly he sighed, remembering the look on Rokou's face as he had recognised his brother.

"Even dressed this way, and after so long apart, Rokou has sought me out." He murmured. "I don't know whether to be annoyed at him for clinging on, or to feel sorry for him for what I've left my family to

deal with. That he'd have the foresight to conceal my location from them — I wouldn't have thought it possible, not from my weak-willed, pathetic older brother. But still, I suppose people change. Or perhaps it's just a lack of courage, in the end… but either way, it's better that they don't know all the details. That I'm in his Highness's service now as Nuriko, that's all they need to know."

He sighed, shrugging his shoulders.

"Noone else need know any more than that, now." He realised. "Nuriko is my new self — the name that I can use no matter what my gender happens to be. So I'll stick to it. Who knows? I might get to like it, as time goes on. Even if the Emperor is stuck on Miaka as he seems to be."

He grimaced.

"His Highness and Tamahome both." He acknowledged inwardly as he turned the corner back towards the group of smartly turned out guards that patrolled the palace gates at regular intervals. "Yeesh, what's wrong with the people around here? Is this a hidden Miko power noone told me about? And dammit, even I'm starting to be fond of her now. But it does bother me when she's near Hotohori-sama, and he's looking at her in that way that he's never looked at any of us in the seraglio. No matter how even-tempered I play it with Tamahome, it hurts a lot more than I can ever let show."

He sighed heavily.

"I really am too much in love with him, aren't I?" He muttered. "Proof positive that I am a woman, whatever my body wants to think."

Not far away, in the recesses of the city's back alleys, a lone figure crouched between two ramshackle buildings, observing the finely dressed stranger with an eagle-eye.

"So that really *is* Nuriko, after all." He reflected to himself as he watched the man-dressed-as-woman greet the guards on duty with a smile, hailing a couple by name as he disappeared into the palace beyond. "My senses haven't deceived me. He is a man, and more, one of my Seishi brethren."

He sat back against the dusty wall, setting his *shakujou* to one side as he made himself more comfortable.

"He didn't sense me this time, so I suppose the last time was a fluke… if he even did sense me at all." He mused inwardly. "Which is

partly a shame, but perhaps for now it's a good thing, you know. Still, there's no use me sitting around here. There's nothing more I can learn about these people until I come to fight with them. So, onto plan B. If I want to learn anything more about Kutou, I'm going to do it best by going to the source. Which means… heading back east."

Fleetingly images of Seisen's destruction flashed through his thoughts, and he frowned, his grip on his *kasa* tightening.

"Taiitsukun's put her trust in me and I *won't* let that be Kounan's future." He decided resolutely. "Which means that whatever I can do — I'll do!"

Chapter 7

Chapter Six

"So, Kounan think that they can treat with us, do they?"

Shoukitei leant back against the stiff support of his throne, drumming his fingers idly on the armrest as he gazed down at the crouched figure before him. The envoy, wearing the red and gold of Suzaku's country gazed back up at him, biting his lip anxiously as if he was trying to assess his companion's thoughts. And, thought the Eastern Emperor, quite possibly he was.

There was a moment of silence, the tension in the chamber heavy and Shoukitei was aware of the apprehension in his visitor's eyes as he awaited an Imperial answer. He was a man in his middle or late twenties, Shoukitei reckoned, with the dark, sun-touched skin of the South. Thick dark hair fell to his shoulders, framing his still-youthful features and dark brown eyes flickered with hope and doubt simultaneously as the Emperor allowed the pause to stretch to an almost unbearable point. The man was not unattractive, yet even as he looked at him, Shoukitei found his interest waning. Yes, he was handsome, but there was nothing outstanding in his appearance and inwardly he discarded the stranger's importance.

"A plaything for Nakago, perhaps." He reflected inwardly. "But not enough to spark my interest and save his life. Saihitei is a fool to keep sending these young idiots to my court. At the very least, given the hugely exaggerated reports of his own apparent beauty, he could give me the pleasure of speaking to him face to face. I'm sure, if the rumours are true, he would be a much more attractive proposal than these sunbronzed stragglers he keeps throwing into the Dragon's den in his place."

He smiled, a slight, humourless grin that twisted cruelly up the side of his mouth at this thought. His gaze darted back towards the waiting envoy, noting the beads of sweat beginning to form on the man's brow as the silence threatened to break beyond five minutes. Yet still he did not move, his body rigid with tension but his resolve to conduct his Emperor's bidding firm in his expression.

Shoukitei's black eyes glittered, and at length he slowly nodded his head, raising a hand in acquiescence.

“Speak, then, envoy of Saihitei. What is it your Emperor seeks?”

“Highness, if I may, Saihitei-sama sends me with all cordial greetings to his brother Emperor in the East, and the continued hope that relations may be softened between them.” The envoy began, still not daring to move from his crouched position as he eagerly babbled his leader’s will. “My master has sent me with the earnest request that representatives of our two countries meet to re-evaluate and negotiate terms of trade and peace with yourselves in the East.”

“I see.” Shoukitei’s eyes narrowed. “So your Emperor is a coward, then, who sends men to talk instead of to fight?”

“With all respect, your Highness, Saihitei-sama seeks a peaceful resolution which will benefit all people — yours and his own.” The envoy said softly. “He does not wish to spill the blood of his people any more than he is sure you wish to sacrifice Kutou’s.”

“Then tell me something, man of Suzaku.” Shoukitei’s eyes became near slits. “Is there any truth in the rumoured appearance of Suzaku no Miko in the Southern lands?”

There was a moment of hesitation, and Shoukitei saw a mixture of emotions go through the younger man’s gaze. Then the brown eyes hardened, and the envoy shook his head.

“I am simply my Emperor’s mouthpiece, my Lord.” He said frankly. “I have only the information I have been sent to Kutou with — that, and no more.”

“So you will not answer my question?”

“I cannot, Heika.” The envoy bowed his head low in apology. “I am not so deep into my Emperor’s trust to know information of that level of importance, and can neither confirm nor negate your Highness’s questions. I only have the power to carry the message which I have now relayed.”

“I see.” Shoukitei reached up to rub his beard pensively, digesting the man’s words carefully. At length he glanced up, his gaze meeting the impassive blue eyes of the room’s other occupant who, until that point had remained silent, listening and observing the entire exchange with no expression on his face. A smile touched the Emperor’s features once more and he held out his hand, beckoning for the man to step forward.

“Nakago.”

“Yes, Heika?” Nakago’s response was immediate, as he dropped

into a position of humility before his King. “What is it you require?”

“Stand, Nakago… and regard this man.” Shoukitei instructed, seeing the Southern envoy quail slightly as he caught the gaze of the odd, Hin-born soldier. So, he reflected, stories of his tribal protector had spread even so far as Kounan’s border. Somehow he took pleasure in that fact, knowing that the emptiness that gleamed in Nakago’s blue eyes was also reflected in the soul that burned within. A man entirely without independant will or desire, he mused, and yet the most perfect weapon of all weapons he hoped to deploy against Saihitei’s nation.

Nakago did as he was bidden, casting those cold seiran eyes on the hapless Southerner.

“This envoy comes from the South to treat with us on Saihitei’s behalf, yet brings none of the answers we seek. Will you tell him what you told me, and see how he answers?”

“With pleasure, sire.” Nakago nodded, a faint, hard little smile touching his lips.

“My sources have told me that a young girl has appeared in Kounan, and that those blessed with the mark of Suzaku have begun to flock to her.” He said quietly. “You have come from Kounan, and therefore must know this same fame as well as I do.”

He cast Shoukitei a sidelong glance, then,

“My Emperor is not a fool, nor is he a patient man who enjoys playing games with foreign ambassadors.” He added, a cool edge to his words. “I suggest you tell him what he wishes to know, before any talk of peace is tendered.”

“With all respect, Shougun-sama, I have told him what I know.” Despite himself, the envoy squared himself bravely. “There are always rumours, but I have only the order to convey facts to his Highness Shoukitei-sama of Kutou. This I have done to the best of my meagre ability. Saihitei-sama wishes to re-establish stable trade links with Kutou and hopes to negotiate to avoid a war. More than that I do not know, and cannot say.”

“If that’s the case, then there is no further cause for discussion.” Shoukitei’s gaze flickered back in the direction of his Shougun. “Nakago, I’ll leave him in your hands… you know how best to deal with situations such as these.”

“Yes, Heika.” Nakago bowed his head, fair hair falling over his shoulders as his blue eyes glinted with malice. “I understand and shall

act thus."

He turned, raising his hand as soldiers emerged from the darkened corners of the chamber, surrounding the now frightened envoy without a word.

"Take him below." Nakago spoke softly, but there was a tone in his words which debarred defiance. "I will join you shortly, and we will see what this man knows."

He gestured to dismiss them, and as one the soldiers grasped the panicked envoy firmly by the arms, hauling him towards the entrance of the chamber despite his cries and struggles to get free.

At length the door closed behind them, and Nakago offered his Emperor a cold smile.

"With your permission, Heika, I will interrogate this man myself." He said softly.

"I had a feeling you might say that." Shoukitei returned the smile, as lacking in warmth as the Hin's gesture had been. "After all, this is Saihitei's… third attempt to send people here on an errand of diplomacy? Surely the young fool must realise when he hears nothing in return that we don't intend to talk?"

"The previous two men held firm against betraying their Lord." Nakago observed. "Despite my best efforts I was unable to withdraw any information from any of them about Suzaku or the Miko that has allegedly appeared below the border."

"But you do believe that the girl is there?"

"Yes, Heika. I believe it." Nakago's brows knitted thoughtfully. "As I believe Seiryuu no Miko will soon come to our aid, also. I am Nakago, after all."

He reached up to brush his forehead.

"The mark that appears here is proof that a Miko will come — and must come — to Kutou's aid."

"Then I wish she'd hurry up and appear before I order our forces to march on Kounan." Shoukitei said bad-temperedly. "I would have launched an invasion already, if not for this Suzaku no Miko business. I want to know what's going on in the south — Nakago, with all your military training you understand as well as any that if our men invaded and Suzaku was summoned, it would be a humiliation for our people. Seiryuu represents fighting and Kutou's noble houses would never forgive an Emperor who allowed such a thing to happen to our

proud line."

He shivered.

"Two hundred years ago my ancestors tried to take the frozen North and were battled back by Genbu and his cursed Miko." He added. "I will not let the same thing happen in my own lifetime."

He clenched his fists.

"I want Kounan." He murmured. "I want to stamp all over that country that calls itself Kutou's equal, even when it languishes in size and military power. I want to crush this pretty boy Emperor who believes in peace and who has allowed the Southern armies to fall back and rest on their laurels. Kounan has resources that almost equal our own, and if we could take it then we could expand Kutou's power to yet new levels. But Suzaku must be stopped. There must be no summoning of that cursed bird. You understand, Nakago? Your stellar counterparts must be destroyed."

"I understand, Heika." Nakago inclined his head slightly. "I have already taken steps towards that end."

"Steps?" Despite himself, Shoukitei looked curious. "Of what nature?"

"Spies." Nakago's lips twisted once more into an empty smile. "I have dispatched many shadows to stalk the South. They are dispensible people and trained to die rather than reveal their secrets or their origins. They will seek out Suzaku's folk, if they can, and slay them — or at the very least bring us some report. I have told them they need not return to Kutou and expect to keep their lives if they cannot bring me something of value — in your name they will flush out the ones branded by Suzaku."

He touched his forehead again, and Shoukitei wondered if his powerful companion could feel the buzz of Seiryuu's energy flickering beneath his skin.

"You should leave everything to me. I will take care of it."

"And as for Seiryuu's people?"

"Do not concern yourself." Nakago assured him. "Once our Miko is here, our Seishi will also gather. I am aware of some of them and that they are within the vicinity of the capital city. You should rest easy… it will not be difficult to crush a country such as Kounan. With or without Suzaku's magic, they are doomed."

He glanced towards the door.

“With my Emperor’s permission, I will go and join my men in the interrogation of that envoy.” He added. “I am truly interested to know any information he might be persuaded to give on Suzaku’s people. And, perhaps, on Saihitei-sama himself.”

“Go.” Shoukitei nodded. “And Nakago?”

“Yes, Heika?”

“Ensure there are no remains to lead a trail back to Kounan’s capital.” Shoukitei smiled, darkness glittering in his black gaze. “Take care of things. We will leave no loose ends.”

“Yes, Heika.” Nakago agreed. “As you command.”

With that, the fair-haired, fair-skinned Shougun withdrew from the chamber, closing the doors more softly behind him than the departing soldiers had done, and Shoukitei rubbed his beard once more, ruminating on the accidental fortune of having discovered one of Seiryuu’s own so many years earlier. Since the destruction of the Hin tribe some fifteen or so years before, Nakago had been his constant companion, both in matters of politics and at times in matters of physical attraction. With his beautiful skin and attractive features, Shoukitei had been unable to resist the boy and even now, as a man, he saw beauty in Nakago which sometimes even drew him away from his many court concubines. He had already done his duty by Seiryuu, he reflected, humour glittering in his eyes. He had sired sons to succeed him, and even sons which would not, for he had never been shy of fulfilling his courtly responsibilities. But Nakago had always held another kind of attraction for him, and, as Shoukitei pondered on it, he realised that the connection had been mutually beneficial.

“A child of a hated tribe persecuted for perverse religious beliefs, he would have had no life at all if not for my mercy.” He ruminated. “Well, perhaps as a slave — but then all who serve Emperors may as well be slaves, since the will of the King is absolute.”

“Heika.”

At this moment the door of the chamber opened once more, revealing the finely garbed, portly form of one of Shoukitei’s most staunch allies and supporters, his breast glittering with the insignia of the Kaiga family. The man paused, making a cursory obeisance towards his master which spoke more of the assumed friendship between them than it did of any respect for the man’s position, yet despite it Shoukitei smiled, getting to his feet.

“Gin… well, and what news have you to bring me? I hope all good

— considering I have trusted such important measures to your hands."

"Have I ever let you down, Heika?" Gin shifted his substantial bulk to his feet, his wide features twitching into a grin as he met his Emperor's gaze. "You know you will have the complete support of my people when it comes to the advance of war with Kounan. I have made it so that none of them will dare refuse the call to arms."

"As I expected, your power over your retainers leaves nothing to be desired." Genuine pleasure flickered in Shoukitei's cold dark eyes. "Although dare I ask by what measures you assured such loyalty?"

"The oldest in the book, Heika." Gin seemed amused. "Fear. I made it clear that any man who did not agree would be stripped of his rank and position, and branded as a slave without wage or free will. To serve alongside the tribal creatures who drudge our land did not appeal to any… they would sooner don Imperial armour and fight than descend to such a base level."

"Tribal creatures…" Shoukitei looked thoughtful, and Gin cast him a questioning look.

"Heika?"

"Your words put me in mind, Gin, of settlements near the border… tell me, are all the tribal lands within your own sight now purged of life?"

"Yes, sire, and all the way up to the northern border, too." Gin nodded, seemingly satisfied with his response. "As per your order, no settlements other than Kutou-jin ones have been allowed to stand on Kaiga land. Why do you ask?"

"Slaves are useful." Shoukitei said frankly. "If we deploy honest, hard-working men in battle, someone must be there to take the fall of their workload. One slave may bend under the pressure of working two roles, but break under the pressure of three. A dead slave is of no use to any master, after all — I am thinking that it's time we focused our attention once again on the peoples living in the Southern province, and the tribal settlements as yet untouched beyond your lands. Besides, there is a healthy flow of Southern prisoners being brought to our lands to be branded and sold — we should maximise the potential that the Southern Province represents."

"I have influence over the lord who rules there." Gin nodded. "My wife Ruiren is the younger sister, after all, of the current incumbent, and he would not dare to cross his brother in law when it came to Imperial will. I will do what I can to put pressure on him to act in

your name, Heika… so long as you are able to adequately compensate my loyalty."

"As ever, Gin, you will have the best pick of the new harvest." Shoukitei laughed. "Have I let you down in the past? You should have faith in your Emperor. Although surely you cannot need yet more to serve your lands? Even if I claim a portion of your retainers, I'm sure you had quite a booming slave population the last time we spoke. What happened to all those ghost-skinned Meihi from the Northern borders? You had the best of that raid… Did you wear them all out already?"

"No, we still work Meihi on the Estate." Gin responded. "But some of my men are afraid of them and they do have eyes that look right through you. My mother forbade them from even entering her chambers at one point, Seiryuu rest her soul, because she was sure they were cursed and able to weave dark spells over her. And, unless you take them as children, they are a difficult people to beat obedience into. They have too much useless pride as adults, yet children take time to grow and it's all too easy to kill them inadvertently and waste your investment before they reach the best age."

He pulled a face.

"I have had adult Meihi taken directly to work my land before." He concluded. "Apart from a few they chose to resist their fate, and several tried to escape. I lost count of how many I tortured and put to death for desertion… yet it didn't dissuade them from trying. The truth is that they need supervision for the simplest of tasks until their will is fully broken."

"Then you need to get better slaves, my friend." Shoukitei said wisely. "Or better trained slave-masters to manage them."

"Well, not all of us can have such a beautiful Hin to depend upon at a moment's notice." Gin bantered, and Shoukitei's grin widened.

"That is the privilege of an Emperor, Gin, as well you know." He responded. "And Nakago is more than just my Hin. He is my Seishi, too. He is *Seiryuu's* slave as well as my own — surely you don't envy me the position of sharing him with the one who watches over all of us?"

"A slave is a slave, as they say. Divine or not, that's still the case." Gin reflected. "And my wife is young and pretty, so I have plenty to occupy my time. My tastes are not yours, Heika — fortunately, for then I don't covet the things that are yours."

“Gin, you’re teasing me.” Shoukitei scolded, and Gin laughed.

“My apologies.” He acknowledged, bowing his head. “And I truly came only to convey my good news. My people will fight for you, Heika. They will be too frightened not to — you can, as ever, count on Kaiga support.”

“And you will be compensated accordingly.” Shoukitei promised. “Let me know how many head of slaves you will need and I will see to it that you have the best I can provide. Hin, even, if it can be managed. I don’t know where there are still pockets of the Western people in hiding, but my Priest will, and I am sure I can elicit the information from him with little trouble.”

He smiled faintly.

“Convey my best to the Lady Ruiren, also.” He added. “Perhaps soon she will bear you an heir, after all.”

Gin nodded.

“I will not rest until she does.” He agreed. “She has so far proven weak in that department, but it is only a matter of time.”

“Very well.” Shoukitei raised his hand in a languid gesture of dismissal. “I will send Nakago to your estate to rally the relevant people to my banner later on this week. At present he is interrogating a potential spy from Kounan about Suzaku’s secrets, and I dare say it will end badly for the foreigner concerned. But in the lull before the storm, it would be as well for my Shougun to put the fear of the Dragon himself into the men he will be commanding. Hin he may be, Gin, but he has a soldier’s instinct and a ruthless emptiness that makes him invaluable to me. Suzaku’s folk should be afeared of him… after all, no matter what their God produces, they surely can’t match the Dragon of the East.”

“Do you think Suzaku no Miko *has* surfaced in the South, Heika?”

“Nakago believes so, and from his reports, so do I.” Shoukitei agreed. “But he also has faith that Seiryuu’s own Miko will come and soon, too. He is not usually wrong in his assumptions, and I have left such things to him. After all, as my shrine priest informs me… Seiryuu’s own will find Seiryuu’s Miko sooner than anyone else.”

“Then your pretty Hin slave proves his use yet again.” Gin said, amused. “You truly are blessed, Heika, in those that surround you.”

“I happen to like beauty, even if it has sprung from the warped heresy of a forbidden tribe.” Shoukitei reflected. “As Emperor, I

protect Nakago from that. As Emperor, I also use him how I see fit. It is a good arrangement and he is wise enough to appreciate it. He owes me everything, Gin. And for that reason I have faith in him… and in Seiryuu no Miko's coming."

He clenched his fists.

"And then… at last… Kutou truly will take Kounan's pathetic land for itself!"

So, Seisen was indeed getting itself back on its feet.

As he made his way nonchalantly down the grassy bank that led to the ramshackle remains of the village, Hou Jun's lips twitched into a smile and his heart flickered with pleasure to see the first steps the devastated settlement had made to get their lives back on track. Even since Taiitsukun had shown him the villagers' determination in her mirror much had been done, and now where there had been little more than the stumps of houses he could clearly see the growing shapes of new homes and storehouses rising up from the wreckage.

Somehow it felt good to be back in Seisen. If he had had an earthly home since the day he had lost his own people, this village, he knew, was it.

"Hou Jun!"

As the monk reached the riverbank, he heard someone yell his name and he turned, a grin on his lopsided features as he held out his hands to greet the caller. Kouran looked well, he decided, her cheeks flushed with health and hard work and wisps of her dark hair framed her face, making her look somehow older than her years. Behind her came the tall frame of her soon to be husband, Shuusei, and the monk marvelled on the growing strength of the couple's bond.

"Seisen prospers, then, I see." He said softly, and Kouran nodded.

"Thanks to you, it does." She agreed, turning to glance down at the settlement below them. "But I didn't expect to see you back here so soon. Why *are* you here, Hou Jun? I thought you left Seisen to follow your destiny with Suzaku… surely that can't be over already?"

"Over? No." Hou Jun shook his head, looking rueful. "In truth, it's barely begun. Suzaku no Miko isn't here at the moment, you know. And I'm not really here to visit Seisen… I just was in the vicinity and I couldn't keep from dropping in. I suppose I have a special feeling for this village, to tell you the truth. And I'm glad to see you're getting it back on its feet. I just wish I had the time to stay and help — but to be

honest I don't think I have any time at all."

"In the vicinity?" Shuusei gazed at him thoughtfully for a moment, then, "Hou Jun-san, are you going back to Kutou?"

"I had considered it." Hou Jun admitted. "Seisen may have wrenched its freedom from Kutou's Emperor for the time being, but over the border much is afoot and I want to find out if there's anything that can be done to stop it. You know better than most, Shuusei, having fought in the Imperial Army, what the enemy is Kounan face."

"Seisen are not Kounan or Kutou, now." Shuusei became grave. "But you are Kouran's friend, and I am on your side. If you mean the Shougun Nakago, then yes… I know the enemy. But he is not an enemy you can take on alone, surely? Even as a sorcerer for Kounan… can you?"

"I don't know yet." Hou Jun glanced at his hands. "But I don't think it's something I have a choice in. I will encounter him soon enough."

"Then my advice would be not to cross the border at all." Shuusei said frankly. "Bad enough to meet him in Kounan, but in Kutou…"

"I know, but a lone monk travelling may not excite as much suspicion as you think." Hou Jun said simply. "I need to know more about their plans for my country, and I'm not in a position to step back and refuse. This is my duty — my purpose — so I have to face it. And if going to Kutou helps me to that end, I'll go."

"But if you get yourself killed, Suzaku no Miko won't be able to raise Suzaku, will she?" Kouran asked anxiously. Hou Jun eyed her ruefully.

"I'm not planning on being killed, you know." He scolded lightly. "I have a little more self-preservation than that."

"Not that I'd seen." Kouran put her hands on her hips. "Since I've known you you've been almost entirely self-destructive for one reason or another. If you're going to be throwing yourself into a dangerous situation I think I've every right to worry about you."

Despite himself, Hou Jun looked abashed, and Shuusei grinned.

"She may be right." He agreed. "But we owe you our lives, so I trust your judgement. Will you stay in Seisen tonight, Hou Jun-san? Or…?"

"I hadn't planned to stop anywhere for long." Hou Jun shook his head. "I'm going to use my magic to get past the border patrols, and I intend on observing Kutou's military preparations for myself. That

way I can at least give the Emperor some useful information, when I go back to Eiyou."

"You've met Kutou's Emperor?" Kouran's eyes opened wide, and Hou Jun looked rueful.

"Well… sort of." He hazarded. "It's complicated, but… yes, I suppose I have."

He sighed.

"And maybe I'll yet meet Kutou's." He added. "Depending on the circumstances. I'm not keen to come face to face with that Shougun before I have to, but if Suzaku calls…"

He shrugged.

"I'm Chichiri now." He concluded. "And wherever Chichiri's needed, he has to go. Wish me luck, the both of you. I think it might take all my wits to get through Kutou unscathed."

"I told you that I don't know anything about Suzaku no Miko!"

The desperate cry of the Southern envoy echoed throughout the depths of the palace dungeon, creating an eerie, haunting sound for the soldiers who stood guard outside the torture chamber. Within, Nakago had soon taken charge of matters, his whip clutched in his hand as he eyed the foreigner with cool, inquisitive eyes.

"Yes." He said softly, his low tones somehow chilling in the dim light of the windowless room. "You've told me so. Many many times. But I'm afraid I don't believe that you're telling me the truth. And my Emperor wants information, therefore we must persist. I will ask you one more time. What is the truth of the rumours surrounding Suzaku no Miko? Has she truly come to Kounan?"

"I don't know anything about it!" The man screamed, and Nakago tightened the whip between his fingers, stretching the black leather taught as he shook his head slowly.

"That isn't the answer I want you to give me." He scolded evenly, releasing his grip on the tails as he drew his arm back, bringing his fist down with some force as the strips cut into the already raw, bloody mess that was the man's bared back. The envoy's body tensed as he let out a piercing screech of agony, and even some of the guards standing sentry within the room flinched at the pain in the man's voice, biting their lips. Nakago's eyes narrowed slightly in irritation, his gaze flitting away from his prey briefly as he surveyed his subordinates.

“If anyone has an objection, speak.” He said quietly. “I will not have any men before me who lack the courage or strength to face their official duty to Kutou.”

There was silence, as one by one each of the apprehensive soldiers dropped their gaze, and Nakago smiled, derision in his ice blue eyes.

“Very well.” He responded. “Then let us continue.”

He strode forward, grasping the envoy’s thick, sweat-drenched hair and pulling his face up so that they met gazes. The man was not much older than he was, Nakago realised, but much more slightly built, and from the foreigner’s heavy gasps of breath and frightened, bloodshot eyes he knew that it would not be long before either fear or pain claimed his life. He tut-tutted under his breath.

“Weak men surround Saihitei of the south, it seems.” He murmured. “Pity. Yet you still refuse to tell me your secrets. Do you wish to die in this way? You do yourself no favours by resisting my questions.”

“If… I die… here… I die… in Saihitei-sama’s… name.” The man gasped out, and despite his hopeless position Nakago saw a faint flare of defiance glitter in his dark brown eyes. “If… I speak… to you… I am… a traitor.”

“So.” Nakago’s eyes narrowed, inwardly despising the man’s ill-fated devotion to his Emperor. “You *do* know something you haven’t told me after all.”

“No… I…”

“By your own admission you have refused to speak to me.” Nakago tightened his grip on the man’s hair, bringing his whip-hand hard across the other’s cheek. “You are obstinate, and I’ll give you credit for your pointless defiance. But you’re trying my patience now.”

“I have… nothing… to say.” The man spat out, and Nakago realised that from somewhere in the depths of his heart the envoy had found the strength to harden his resolve. “Kill me… Shougun of Kutou. I will… not speak… about Suzaku.”

“Well.” Nakago pursed his lips. “Then speak to me about something else, before I grant your wish. Your Emperor has sent three people to the East in recent weeks and months in order to try and reason with us. Each of them has failed, each of them has met your fate. I killed them and I will kill you. Yet each one of them held out the same story until the last. They would not betray their King, not even when offered their worthless, petty lives in return. What is it, then, that

commands you to such irritating obedience? What does your Emperor have that even the threat of death won't induce you to betray him?"

He released his grip on the envoy, who struggled to hold up his head, hatred glittering in his eyes.

"He… is… our… King." The man gasped out.

"And for that King you're willing to go to your death unmourned? Another martyr for a doomed cause?" Nakago looked sceptical, and the envoy's lips twisted into a cold, resolute smile.

"Saihitei-sama will not… be taken down… by people… like you." He spat out. "Kill me, Shougun of Kutou. I… will not… speak further."

With that he closed his mouth, dropping his head, and to all appearances it seemed that he had lost consciousness.

"Shall we cut him down, Shougun? He's out for the count." One of the guards suggested, and Nakago shook his head.

"He's not out yet." He said evenly. "I can sense his thoughts, prickling at the edge of his aura like a beast trying to escape from a cage. I'll show him a little more pain before I release him to death."

He drew back the whip once more, bringing it down hard across the envoy's blood-soaked back, and despite his resolve, the man let out another earsplitting screech of agony. Nakago did not falter, bringing the whip down again and again until blood streamed down the man's limbs and dripped into pools of darkness onto the chamber floor. Despite the greenish hue of some of his men's faces, he did not relent until he felt the faint prickling of the prisoner's psyche cease to flicker at the edge of his awareness. Then he dropped the whip to the floor, glancing at the spatters of blood that covered his hands.

"Well, I wonder what Suzaku's blood tastes like." He murmured sardonically, lifting his fingers to his lips as he carefully licked the tips clean. "The blood of a martyr or the blood of a traitor — I wonder which."

"Is he… dead, Shougun?"

"As good as." Nakago nodded, turning to his queasy men as he offered them a cool smile. "Your duty is done. You are dismissed."

"Yes, Shougun." With relief glittering in their eyes, the men scrambled to leave the room, and at length Nakago was left alone with his prey, crossing the floor to touch the still form of the envoy with curious, pensive fingers.

“Loyal till death, each one.” He reflected aloud. “An Emperor for whom you’d sacrifice everything, even under torture.”

His lips twitched into an expression of irritation.

“Already I dislike this Saihitei.” He murmured. “Whatever power he wields over his people is unnatural and it may prove a problem. The sooner I eliminate him from the equation the better.”

He smiled, resting his hand on the foreigner’s blooded back as he focused his thoughts, and on his brow the character ‘*kokoro*’ began to glimmer a soft blue in the darkness of the chamber.

“Seiryuu’s mark will be the death of many, Emperors and commoners alike.” He reflected, even as the surge of energy engulfed the envoy’s body, evaporating its cells into nothing with the force of his power. “I will not be stopped. Even now agents are trawling the Phoenix’s land in search of those bearing the mark of Suzaku on their bodies. Saihitei or no Saihitei, I will take the South and I will humble them. And then, when all are in the South…”

He paused, turning his gaze back towards the corridor that led towards the throne room.

“Then I will return East.” He mused. “And all will be avenged.”

Chapter 8

Chapter Seven

"So that is the way things are."

Hotohori rested his hands on the windowsill of his private office, gazing pensively out at the setting sun as the sky across Kounan began to darken for the night. Inside his heart, too, he knew, the flicker of light and hope that Miaka's coming had given him were also beginning to fade. It was almost three weeks now since the young girl had departed for her own land, and in her absence, Kounan faltered.

"My apologies, sire. It was not the report I know you hoped to hear." His companion, Kounan's middle-aged and experienced Prime Minister Haku Shouei bowed his head, reservation and worry in his own dark eyes. "From hereon in, I think it would be prudent to assemble the council for emergency meetings on what is to be done. Whilst I know you're working as hard as you can to prevent war — perhaps it would be wise to ready the South just in case?"

"By ready, I suppose you mean conscription." Hotohori turned, meeting his elder's gaze with reproachful gold eyes. "Don't you?"

"Yes, sire. I confess I do." His companion admitted heavily. "It can't be concealed from the provinces any longer that Kutou pose us a serious threat. Already trade is beginning to falter."

"Yes, I know. I have heard reports on all these things already this morning from various departments, all of whom seem to think their matter is most pressing."

Despite himself, Hotohori could not keep the impatient edge from his tones, and at his leader's irritation, Haku sighed.

"Heika…"

"I'm sorry." Hotohori frowned, rubbing his temples. "I just seem to have had nothing but bad news from dawn until dusk. First, I discover that there have been several attacks and blockades on supplies coming from the Eastern territories into Kounan, and that many of the things this country needs are becoming difficult and expensive resources. I have already had one petition for aid from a town in Kuso-ken whose entire economy is under threat because of these blockades. I have departments demanding I raise taxes on a populace already troubled

by feeding and clothing themselves, in order to keep the treasury afloat and to fund a war that I do not wish to fight. And now you come to me to report the disappearance in suspicious circumstances of my envoys. What do you imagine I feel at present, knowing that this land my father left me is about to face its greatest challenge? The decisions are all mine, Haku. I must be the one to face them and, in the end, to live with them. The blood of these people is on my conscience even before it is spilled. Do you think I can conscript so easily, knowing that?"

"I understand your feelings, Heika." Haku replied softly. "And that at present Suzaku's calling is also pressing on your mind. But please, listen to me for a moment. To have an army readied and trained means that, if war strikes, we will better be able to stave off the advancing forces. In the end the blood of soldiers may be exchanged for the blood of civilians — women and children with no form of defence."

"And if I take from them their menfolk to fight a war, who will defend them then?" Hotohori demanded. "No, Haku. Not yet. The men you call soldiers are as yet civilians themselves. Conscription creates forced fighters, not ones trained with heart and soul."

"But Heika…"

Hotohori sighed, gazing down at his Prime Minister's beseeching expression.

"All right." He murmured. "I will venture a compromise. I will issue a proclamation across the land which asks all men to come of their own conscience and volition to serve in the Imperial forces. I will not force men from their families or their fields at a time when Kounan's external trade is faltering. We may equally rely on those farmers and labourers to stave off mass starvation, whether or not Kutou declare war. This is as far as I am willing to go… war is not yet certain, yet there is no preventing the breakdown in trade."

Haku's eyes closed for a moment, then they opened again and Hotohori saw the flicker of relief in their depths. Slowly he nodded.

"I will make the necessary arrangements." He responded. "And will submit the final copy to you for your seal before it is distributed to the cities and towns. Thank you, Heika. At least this way we have some hope of building a stable military force."

"Do you think so?" Hotohori's eyes clouded. "I have heard the stories coming out of Kutou. That three separate Southern envoys to the Eastern court should disappear — not even be found dead, but

simply to vanish without trace — this concerns me a good deal. There is something at work in that land and I don't like to think what it is. If I didn't know better…"

He faltered, biting his lip, and Haku eyed him anxiously.

"Heika?"

Hotohori sighed heavily.

"It doesn't matter." He murmured. "It is probably nothing more than my overactive paranoia. I did not sleep well these past couple of nights."

"And yet, if something concerns you, it is my duty to try and resolve it."

"This is not something you can resolve, even with all your dedication and diligence." Hotohori murmured. "It simply concerns me that mysterious forces may be at work in our enemy land. Even those forces… of the divine."

"Seiryuu?" Haku's eyes widened in horror, and Hotohori spread his hands.

"I pray not." He replied. "But I fear…"

His fingers went to the mark on his neck, as he felt the hot, pulsing sensation of Suzaku's energy against his skin.

"Miaka is not here." He whispered. "Without Suzaku no Miko, what *can* Kounan do to protect itself?"

It was another bright morning in the Eastern Village.

Genrou slipped his fingers into his pockets, whistling a tune under his breath as he headed up the stony path that led towards the stream that divided his home village from the inelegant scramble that marked the foot of Reikaku-zan. It was still early in the morning, and his mother and eldest sister had headed towards Souun almost at daybreak in order to run errands and get the best deals before the town became busy. For once his father had elected to go with them, and so with Rin'an and Manka engrossed in doing the weekly laundry, and Genrou had taken his chance to slip away from their constant nagging and attention, darting out of the back way and vaulting the fence as soon as Manka had turned her back on him.

It had been three weeks since he had come to stay in the village, and worry about Hakurou's condition was weighing heavily on his

mind. In the past few days since their confrontation, the dark-clad strangers had not been seen in the village at all, and Genrou had decided that, in light of their disappearance, he would soon be able to leave to make his trip into the North.

Yet the human in him also wanted to make sure his Kashira was still battling the fever as bravely as he had been on the day he had left, and some shred of almost familial concern had driven Genrou to take the mountain path and not the one leading to Souun and the North.

“I’ll get a thick ear if Ma discovers I’ve slipped out before I get to the stream and cross it.” He reflected ruefully. “But at the very least I need to see Kouji an’ the others an’ make sure Kashira’s still goin’ on okay. With any luck I’ll make it back before anyone misses me, an’ she need never know I went. I’ll leave for the Shouryuu tonight, if I can — whether they like it or not, the danger’s passed an’ I needn’t hang around wastin’ precious time in the village when I could be bein’ useless to my sanzoku buddies. Plus, I still gotta mention to them what Rin’an said about people in the area an’ the trade situation. Maybe we’re gonna have to toughen up on toll from the mountain path.”

His thoughts flickered back to his visit to Souun three weeks earlier, and he frowned, his expression uncharacteristically serious as he contemplated the old stall-holder’s words.

“War, huh.” He murmured. “This area’s as far as you can get from the Eastern border, but even so… I wonder. Yesterday, when I went with Manka an’ Rin’an to Souun to get rope an’ shit, there was that guy in the centre readin’ an Imperial Proclamation about conscription. It’s only a matter o’ time, if that’s the case, that there’s gonna be some fightin’ goin’ on. And people will go, no doubt… even from here, if it’s the Emperor callin’. I wonder what Kashira’ll have us do about it. We’re bandits, after all. We have our own concerns, but even so… the Emperor…”

He faltered, shaking his head as if to clear it. Absently rubbing at his bandaged arm, he glanced up at the sky, realising it was going to be another blazing summer’s day.

“At least this year’s harvest should be safe.” He murmured, then caught himself, grinning ruefully as he realised three weeks surrounded by his flustering, worry-wart sisters had begun to infect him too.

“Like harvest matters to a bandit.” He scolded himself. “Sure, I’ll

see the girls are okay… Ma an' Pa too, if need be. But I ain't a farmer an' I ain't going to worry about the farm when it ain't down to me to do it. I have a Kashira to support back to health — that's the only thing that matters to me right now."

He kicked idly at a pebble, watching as it rolled into a ditch at the side of the path. There had been no more rain since the storm that had allegedly damaged the Kou barn roof, and any puddles had long since evaporated into nothing, but Genrou had lived in the South long enough to know such tropical tempests crept up at a moment's notice. However, the sky was a brilliant blue, with none of the brassiness that pre-empted danger, and Genrou found himself thanking his lucky stars that, as yet, the weather had remained clement.

"This path's bad enough when it's dry, but when it's wet it's friggin' suicidal." He reflected. "I swear more people'll break their neck tryin' to get up here than they will fightin' for the Emperor in this stupid Kutou war that everyone keeps predictin'. I guess that means Reikaku-zan'll be safe enough. Surely no military leader'd be idiot enough to send soldiers into an armed mountain with an entry like this'un."

"Shun'u!"

A shriek from behind him made him stop in his tracks, muttering a string of expletives under his breath as he registered the shrill pitch of his sister's voice.

"Aw, shit, Manka, what the hell do you want now?" He demanded, turning to face her. "I have other things to do, you know, and…"

He faltered, as his sister grasped his hands, absorbing for the first time the state the young woman was in. Her hair had slipped from its usual ribbons in what had clearly been a difficult scramble up the unforgiving mountain path, and her gown was soiled and torn in places from where it had caught on branches or briars on her way up. Her arms bore further evidence of having encountered thorns, and Genrou bit his lip, eying her in consternation.

"Manka… neechan?"

"Shun'u, why are you leaving now?" Manka gripped hold of his hands, alarm in her eyes. "I almost couldn't find you… if someone hadn't seen you come this way… dammit, Shun'u, you can't go to the mountain! Not now… not now!"

"What are you babbling about?" Genrou pulled his fingers free of her clawing grasp, eying her warily. "Why not now? Hell, I've been with you lot for far longer'n I should've, all things considered. There's

no danger now, is there? Noone's seen anythin' of those guys for almost a week. They've moved on an' besides, if I'm nearby, there's always risk…"

"Shut up and listen to me!" Manka cut across him, impatience and urgency in her voice, and despite himself Genrou was struck silence by the insistance in her tone. "They came back… they came back!"

"What?" Despite himself, Genrou felt a curl of fear begin to stir in his heart. "But… what do you mean, came back?"

"What I said!" Manka was near tears now, as it dawned on her brother that something serious had happened and that it was not simply household chores that had made his older sister clamber up the steep mountain path to retrieve him. "Please, Shun'u-kun, hurry… hurry! They were on the farm… one of them, anyway. The one… who… at Rin'an. And… Shun'u…"

She faltered, her breath catching in her throat, and to his dismay, Genrou realised his companion was on the verge of hysteria.

"Tell me what happened." He said firmly, grasping her by the arm and leading her resolutely down the mountain path in the direction of the village. "I'm comin', so don't you start howlin'. I don't speak girl as it is, an' I speak howlin' girl even less, so put it into plain speak. Where was this guy? I don't understand. What has he done to make you like this?"

"Rin'an." Manka swallowed hard. "Shun'u, he came..after Rin'an."

"What?" Anger flooded through Genrou's body at this and he inadvertently tightened his grip, causing her to wince.

"You're hurting me!"

"Sorry." Genrou frowned, obediently loosening his grasp and Manka rubbed her arm, eying him reproachfully.

"You're rough, Shun'u." She muttered. "An' Ma'll give you a thick ear when she finds out you'd taken off and left us. Just because she an' Aidou went to Souun an' Pa went with them t'talk to an old acquaintance… I thought you were out in the barn… an' then… when that guy came…"

She swallowed hard.

"He slapped me an' pushed me aside." She said softly, reaching up to touch her face gingerly as she did so. "An' he went after Rin'an. She laughed at him to start with — she told him that she wasn't interested in him no matter how much coin he offered her. But he was… he

wasn't takin' it from her. He didn't listen. He just grabbed her..an'…"

Genrou's heart froze and he gazed at his companion in horror.

"And…?" He demanded, half-fearing the answer. Manka shook her head, tears spilling down her cheeks.

"I don't know." She confessed. "He wouldn't let go an' she was tryin' to pull free but he didn't… an' she told me to go find you. But you weren't on the farm. An' I didn't know… but our neighbour said he'd seen you walkin' this way an' so I came…"

She swallowed again, and Genrou cursed, inwardly berating himself.

"What if he's hurt her, Shun'u?" Manka asked fearfully. "What if he…?"

"Don't." Genrou snapped. "Don't say it. I ain't gonna let that kind of shit happen — not to my family, an' definitely not to one o' my sisters. It's my bad, dammit. I thought the danger was past. I was only goin' to the mountain to check on the Kashira but I guess that lowlife must've seen me leave the village too. Else he never would've tried his luck. I'm away, Pa's away — an' he decided that his chance was here. Suzaku or no Suzaku, Aidou was right, goddamn her. This was about Rin'an as much as it was about me. An' I assumed it wasn't… an' now this."

He clenched his fists, knowing that beneath the bandaging on his right arm his Suzaku mark was blazing hotly in protest to the treatment of his middle sister.

"But Shun'u…"

"Don't worry." Genrou said grimly. "I'll show him. I'll show him a lesson he ain't ever goin' to forget. I'll protect Rin'an, Manka. Don't worry."

By that point they had reached the farm gates, and Genrou neatly vaulted over the top of the fence, pausing for a moment as he gauged where his older sister would most likely be. As he did so, he heard the sound of a muffled screech and then a thud coming from the direction of the barn, and he bit his lip.

"Right." He muttered. "Manka, stay here. Stay here, dammit, an' clean yourself up. When Ma an' Aidou get back, tell them that I'm seein' to it an' not to worry. Certainly not to get involved. I'll see Rin'an okay, no matter what it takes."

Manka eyed him for a moment, tears still glittering on her lashes.

Then, slowly, she nodded.

“Don’t let him hurt her.” She whispered. “Saving her life ain’t enough, Shun’u. It’s more than that, where a woman’s concerned.”

“I know, dammit. I wasn’t born yesterday.” Genrou snapped. “I grew up in a house full o’ women an’ I know the score.”

His fingers drifted to his waist, curses spilling from his lips as he realised he didn’t have his sword. His mother had forbidden him to walk around the village with it and so had confiscated it, and in his hurry to leave that morning he had not bothered to retrieve it from her room. Now, he knew, time was of the essence, and in a split-second he made his decision.

Leaving the farm and the sword behind him, he darted off in the direction of the barn, inwardly sending a prayer to Suzaku that he would find his sister unscathed.

“I shouldn’t have left the farm.” He muttered fiercely under her breath. “Dammit, if he hurts Rin’an… I won’t ever forgive him — or myself!”

Chapter 9

Chapter Eight

“Rin’an!”

Genrou burst through the barn doors, paying little heed to the rusting lock that had bent and broken beneath the force of his effort. Daylight streamed through behind him, casting slithers of light across the stocks of hay and grain that the family had stored there the previous harvest, and to begin with he could not see anything clearly amid the mottled shadows.

“Rin’an, dammit, where the hell are you!” He exclaimed, his voice rebounding around the inside of the wide-framed building as he took a tentative step or two forward, squinting into the black for any sign of his missing sister. For the briefest of moments he regretted not having the tessen to call on, then a faint shred of sanity returned to him as he realised that a fire in a barn full of grain and hay would not do much to help the girl — and that his mother would probably not easily forgive him for the destruction of their reserves.

Even as he discarded that thought, however, he was sure that in the blackness he heard a thump and a muffled noise that sounded like a scream, and his resolution doubled. Muttering another curse for the fact his mother had confiscated his mountain blade, he darted forwards, instinctively glancing around him for anything that he could use if the circumstances called for a makeshift weapon. Young as he still was, and dense as he could still be, Genrou was under no illusions about the kind of thing a man could do to a woman. His time on the mountain and his childhood surrounded by women had taught him enough to know that the figure lurking around the Kou farmstead had meant his family no good, and as he remembered Aidou’s words, he knew that that pale, sallow individual intended to force his way with his missing middle sister.

“Rin’an! It’s Shun’u — where are you, damn you! I know you’re in here!”

“Shun’u!” At that moment he heard his sister’s voice, followed by the muttered curse of what sounded like a man’s voice, and then a thud. “Shun’u, help me! Please God, *help me*!”

The rest of what she might have tried to say was muffled and

incoherent, as if someone had thrust a heavy arm over her mouth to prevent her from speaking, but it had been enough for Genrou's sharp senses to pinpoint her location. Rage flooded through him as he charged forward, instincts carrying him in the direction that the scream had come from.

As he rounded one of the straw bays, he finally found what he was looking for, realising as he did so that his — and Manka's — worst fears had come true.

As Manka had told him, she was not alone. The man who he had confronted on the path to Souun had indeed taken his chance to claim the favours of one of the pretty Kou girls, and with a jolt Genrou wondered if it had been because of that confrontation that he had decided to inflict pain on the Kou family in this way. Rin'an would, he knew, have tried to refuse his advances with the most disdainful manner possible. Yet the man had not taken no for an answer, as, despite his own claims to the contrary, Aidou had truly been proven correct about the intruder's intentions. The stranger had been captivated as many men had been before by the deceptive beauty that masked Rin'an's inner mischief, and despite Genrou's warning, the intruder had obviously not been able to resist the temptation.

Rin'an was almost covered by her assailant, her presence only given away by the visible edges of her gown and the trailing locks of tousled auburn hair that scattered out around her on the straw. His black cape was drawn over them, but it was clear enough what the stranger intended to do, and that, from the sounds and rustles of straw, the terrified Rin'an was still doing her best to fight against his attempts. Fresh hot fury surged through Genrou's veins at this, and he grabbed the offender firmly, wrenching him forcibly off Rin'an's body as he pushed him hard up against the barn wall.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" He exclaimed, his fingers tightening like a vice around the man's shoulders until he could feel his nails digging into the thin man's skin. "I told you once, didn't I? Come here again — dammit, mess with my family again — and I'd slit your throat myself? What did you think — that because the wolf's away the rats can play?"

He tossed the man down against the floor, eyes glittering with hate as he bore down on him once again.

"Well?" He spat out. "Answer me. *What the hell do you think you were doing?*"

"Sh… Shun'u." Rin'an struggled up from her position in the straw,

pulling her torn dress more tightly around her as if trying to protect herself. The normally quick-witted, impish elder sister that had often lashed Genrou with her sarcasm or taunted him with her jokes was nowhere in evidence, and as Genrou glanced at her, he saw the taint of blood smearing her cheek and jaw. Fresh anger blazed through him at this, and he crouched down, grabbing the man by the scruff of the neck.

"Last chance." He hissed. "Speak up for yourself, or are you too much of a coward to own up to assaulting a lady on her own grounds?"

"Lady?" This sparked the sallow man's own temper and he struggled up, pushing the brawny bandit back with a fierce shove. "What do you think you're protecting, someone's crown jewels? She's a pretty wench, that's all. And a useful one, too. You're just a farmer's son, just like she's just a farmer's daughter. Neither one of you are in any position to tell me what to do."

"Is that a fact?" Genrou's eyes narrowed, fire glittering between his slitted lids. "So you think you're something special, do you? So much so that any woman you want is for the taking — that any woman is willing to spread her legs for you because you're so damn important? Is that it? Or don't you think that 'farmer's daughters' have any right to a say in the matter?"

"She's just a girl." The other man had regained his form now, icy dark eyes glinting in the dim light of the barn, and as he cast Rin'an a disparaging glance, the girl shrank back, clutching her clothing more tightly around her body. Her face was as white as snow, Genrou realised, and for an instant he wondered just how far this intruder's assault had been allowed to go. Inwardly he cursed his having left the farm, even for a short time.

"I knew he was lurking. I should've taken him more seriously." He muttered. "But I thought it was me he was after. Even after what Aidou said, he kept talkin' about Suzaku's mark — why the hell would I know he seriously was wantin' Rin'an?"

"Well?" The stranger challenged him now. "Nothing to say to that, farm boy?"

"You're disgusting." Genrou snapped back. "Just a girl… what does that even mean? She's a person, ain't she? She has feelings an' shit an' you're tramplin' right over them! Besides, you can hardly call yourself a man, as it stands. Invading people's territory, assaulting innocent womenfolk — what kind of a man do you think you are, descending to

levels like that?"

"A richer one than you'll ever be." The man retorted, and from behind him, Genrou heard his sister's sharp intake of breath.

"Shun'u, be careful! He's got a sword… he's got a sword!" She exclaimed, and Genrou, momentarily distracted, turned to stare at her in surprise.

"A sword?" He repeated, and even as he spoke the word, he caught the sweeping glint of metal out of the corner of his eye, and felt the prick of something cold at the back of his neck.
'Yes, a sword.' The man's cool tones echoed in his ears. "A *man's* weapon, boy. You should have kept out of it. I take what I want, in the end. Because of you, I'll kill you both. You first. Then… her."

He swept his free arm in Rin'an's direction, and Genrou saw the distinct glimmer of fear in his sister's eyes.

Somehow this uncharacteristic expression was enough to galvanise him back into action, and he narrowed his gaze, darting deftly out of the range of the blade as he leapt up onto one of the beams, reaching into the straw for the old, blunt-headed hammer he had hidden there after his work on the previous day. Although he had lost count of the number of times he had fallen foul of Rin'an's practical joking and acerbic sense of humour, he knew that there was no joke this time. Right now all he could see was her terrified expression, and that fear had sparked a protective instinct inside of him which was blazing as hotly as the tessen had that first day he had thrown flame. Rin'an was a girl, true enough, and one of the five reasons he had decided to have nothing to do with women if he could possibly avoid it.

But Rin'an was also his sister, and at that moment, that blood bond was more important than any petty grievance the two of them may have ever had.

In that instant he knew that, if it meant the protection of his family, he would happily kill this intruder. In the same way as he would raise his blade to fight and kill anyone who threatened the stronghold on Reikaku-zan, he was willing to do the same to protect his kin from harm. He was no longer the scrawny fifteen year old who had sought sanctuary on the mountain. Despite his sisters' teasing, he was very decidedly now a man. And, not for the first time in the past year and a half, he felt Suzaku's spirit surging within him as he readied himself for battle.

Keeping the hammer well hidden behind his back, he gazed down coldly at his opponent, steeling himself as he hardened his resolve. No

matter what the outcome, he decided grimly, he would not let this bastard lay another finger on his sister.

“It’s not over that easily.” He said softly, then “Rin’an, get the hell out of here. All right? Get out. Go make sure Manka listens to what I told her an’ if Ma an’ the rest come back make them stay inside — tell them I’ll handle it, and for God’s sake don’t let any of them come out here.”

“But… Shun’u…” Rin’an’s voice was shaky, and Genrou muttered a curse, shaking his head impatiently.

“Just do as you’re damn told for once, will you?” He shot back. “I told you, I’ll handle it! Get out of here before he friggin’ hurts you some more — all right?”

Rin’an stared at him in dumbstruck silence for a moment. Then, slowly and unsteadily she pulled herself to her feet, reaching for her discarded cape as she wrapped it around her shoulders. As she did so, amid the straw and dust that marred her gown, Genrou was aware of more spatters of blood. To his horror he realised that his sister’s upper arms bore deep scratches, most likely caused by the man’s nails in the midst of his struggle to subdue her.

She took a faltering step or two towards the open doorway, but the swordsman was not to be so easily bested and he grabbed her roughly by the wrist, pulling her back towards him. She let out a startled shriek, and Genrou swore out loud, leaping down from the beam as he fought to push himself between them.

“Let her go, you bastard! You’re not going to hurt her any more!” He exclaimed, bringing the hammer across the stranger’s arm and causing him to scream in pain, his sword clattering to the ground as he clutched his injured limb to his chest. Rin’an took her opportunity to break free, stumbling towards the light as she hurried towards the outside world and freedom. Genrou cast her a brief glance, but his main focus was on the assailant, and he dropped the hammer, lunging towards the unarmed man with his bared fists as he wrestled him to the ground. In the struggle, the bandage that had been wrapped so tightly around his right forearm came unravelled, and without even thinking Genrou yanked it out of his way, tossing it aside as he renewed his assault on the shadowy interloper.

For a few moments they struggled, for Genrou’s blow had not been direct enough to shatter the wily stranger’s sinewy limb, and despite his slender form he was both strong and lithe. Still, Genrou had the wolf’s anger surging through him and, with the image of his

bloodstained sister still uppermost in his mind, he felt rage and indignation swelling up inside of him once more as he fought to keep the intruder on the floor.

As he did so, his right arm began to glitter with renewed ruby energy, and at the sight of it the stranger gasped, recognition blazing in his cold eyes as he stared from it to the mountain wolf who loomed over him.

"So it *was* true, after all." He whispered. "Suzaku's man — the one with the wings of Tasuki… here in this pathetic, rundown village after all!"

"What has that got to do with you?" Genrou's eyes narrowed warily, and his grip on the man tightened. "Answer me. Why did you really come here? For me? Is that it? Looking to queen it over one of Suzaku's people? Or just to make free and easy with one of my sisters, huh? Because I ain't the kind of man who stands by an' lets a woman get hurt by scum like you."

"I was sent here to kill you." The other man's eyes hardened. "And now I've found you, Tasuki, I'm going to carry that through to the end. Your sisters are nothing but a passing distraction. It was you I came for. You can hold any harm I've done them on your conscience — if not for you, I never would have come."

As if something cold had stabbed through him, Genrou stared at his opponent in dismay, and in his moment of hesitation, his grip loosened briefly on the other man's collar. The dark-clad interloper laughed, shaking his head in cold amusement at his companion's sudden change in demeanour.

"You see what a curse it is, being chosen of Suzaku's?" He asked softly. "You'd do better to submit and let me kill you. Then you'd never be a bother to your family again, would you? *Ta-su-ki*."

"Don't you call me that again!" Fresh rage surged through Genrou at this and he wrapped brawny fingers around the stranger's throat. "I'll stifle the life out of you first, you lowlife — don't you dare call me that name!"

"Sore point, is it?" The other man looked unperturbed. "You're Suzaku's. You're weak. You don't have the killer instinct that you need to finish me off. I know what Kounan is like. I know what kind of people it fosters. You're too soft to be able to cast the blow, boy. We both know it's true. You're a farmer's son. You're not a killer."

Genrou eyed him for a moment, a cold look entering his bronze

eyes.

“I’m *not* a farm boy.” He said softly. “I’m Genrou of Reikaku-zan. If you don’t know what that means, that’s your bad luck. But I’ve spilled blood before, and I’ll do it again, if the need arises. You’ve already crossed the line too many times. This is your last chance. Tell me why you’re here and who sent you. Tell me the truth.”

“Not even if you claw the life from me with your bare hands.” The man said mockingly. “I’m not afraid of you.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Genrou saw the stranger’s hand twitch towards the discarded sword blade, each movement getting nearer and nearer to its prize. He frowned, biting his lip, and then, as he remembered Rin’an’s stricken expression, he made up his mind.

“You should be.” He said softly, grabbing up the weapon in his right hand and then, without a moment of hesitation, plunging it directly through the stranger’s heart. “If I let you live, you might hurt my sisters again. They may piss me off, but they’re kin an’ I won’t let that happen. Whoever sent you — I don’t care. Keepin’ them safe here — that’s more important. After all, I’m not Suzaku’s anything. I’m jus’ Genrou of the mountain an’ that’s all you need to know.”

The man gasped, clutching at his chest as Genrou stood back, eying the man’s twitching body with a sense of resignation as the life ebbed out of it. At length the intruder lay still, and slowly Genrou shook his head, taking a step away from the corpse with a sigh.

“I’d have preferred to have fought you blade to blade, but Ma took my sword off me the other night.” He said regretfully. “As it is I’ll probably get a clip round the ear for causin’ such a mess in the barn.”

He glanced at his arm, seeing Suzaku’s mark still blazing vividly against his skin, and he sighed, slowly shaking his head.

“It’s comin’ more an’ more, no matter what.” He realised. “An’ now people are comin’ after me, because they’re scared of Suzaku’s chosen. It is a curse after all — an’ I’d be better not bein’ here, if it’s goin’ to bring shit down on my family. I don’t belong in the village now, in any case. The sooner I clear out, the better.”

“Shun’u?”

As he stepped out into the sunlight, he saw Rin’an standing not far away, and at the sight of him, tears began to glitter on her cheeks. Without a word she flung herself on him, crying bitterly, and Genrou stared down at her in dismay.

“Shit, Rin’an, stop leaking over me!” He exclaimed, disentangling himself hurriedly from her embrace. “This ain’t like you — say somethin’ sarcastic! You’re freakin’ me out!”

“What… about… him?” Rin’an swallowed hard, her gaze drifting to the barn, and Genrou’s eyes darkened.

“He won’t hurt you again.” He said evenly.

“You *killed* him?” Rin’an’s expression became one of horror, but there was relief in her eyes. Genrou nodded his head.

“Of course I did.” He said flatly. “What else do you expect me to do, when a guy breaks into my family’s land and assaults my sister?”

Rin’an took a deep breath, and Genrou was relieved to see a flicker of her usual mischievous spirit flare weakly in her hazel eyes.

“You’re not such a runt any more, are you?” She said softly, and Genrou eyed her warily, unsure of her motives. She sighed, shrugging her shoulders.

“Your timing could have been quicker.” She added, glancing at her arms. “These hurt like hell, you know, and I’m all blooded over. Did you forget that I’m getting married in a few weeks time? I’ll look like some monster clawed me, at this rate.”

“Some monster did.” Genrou said darkly, his gaze flitting back towards the barn, and Rin’an’s expression clouded. Slowly she nodded.

“I know.” She said quietly. “I… thank you, Shun’u. You… saved me.”

“What did he do to you? Did he just blood you over, or…?”

Genrou faltered, not sure how to ask the question, and at his awkward concern, Rin’an managed a faint smile. She shook her head.

“He didn’t get that chance.” She assured him. “You were… quick enough for that.”

She smoothed down her torn and stained skirt.

“Okaasan is going to throw a fit. I’m like this, and you’ve… you’ve left a corpse in the barn, surrounded by all the hay and grain…”

“I know, I know. I’ll clean the friggin’ mess up… let me catch my breath first, will you?” Shun’u ran his fingers through his thick wavy hair. “I didn’t expect to be fightin’ someone for your honour this afternoon — give me a moment to get to grips with it before you start givin’ me more orders, okay? Since I turned up here I’ve done nothin’

but run errands and do everyone else's dirty work. No wonder I don't come home more often. You're all friggin' slavedrivers an' this just caps it off."

He sighed, looking troubled.

"Listen, Neechan… did he say anything to you? About… me? Or… Suzaku?"

"Suzaku?" Rin'an looked troubled. "He asked… about the mark again. Like he did the other day. He wanted to know if Manka and I did know anyone who had that kind of a mark on their body. That was his premise for coming to the farm direct."

"But you didn't tell him I did? Even when he was threatening you?"

"Hell no." Rin'an shook her head. "Think Okaa-san would let me forget it if I did? We don't talk about that, an' you shouldn't worry so much about it either. It ain't nothing to do with you, in any case. Whoever that guy was, he wasn't from these parts. He talked funny, an' he didn't seem like someone from Souun or hereabouts. I don't think he came from the Emperor, so you ain't gonna be strung up for treason for killin' him. He seemed like a foreigner to me — someone who didn't know this area at all."

"No… no Souun man would be enough of an idiot to try it on so casually with one of my sisters." Genrou said heedlessly. "All the guys round here know you — and Ma — are friggin' scary as hell if you're pissed off."

"Just because you're the hero today, don't start swaggering an' shooting your mouth off." Rin'an cuffed him gently across the top of his head, but it lacked any of its usual bite and Tasuki knew that his sister's normal sparky venom had been shaken by her experience. "I'm going to go wash. And then I'm going to burn this dress. I ain't gonna fix it, not now — not rent up like this. Easier to make another."

She offered him a faint smile.

"We won't talk about this again." She added. "Please. We'll have to tell Okaa-san an' the others, because… well, there's a dead guy in the barn an' you won't be keepin' that a secret from anyone, soon enough. Besides, Manka saw him too. But… outside the family… I'm gettin' married soon, Shun'u, an'…"

"Relax. I'll keep my mouth shut." Genrou assured her. "It ain't the kind of thing I'd go blastin' up the mountain anyhow. It's too much to do with Suzaku, an' too much t'do with you girls gettin' yourself in danger. It's not bandit business. I ain't goin' to be tellin' anyone."

“Good.” Relief touched Rin’an’s expression and she nodded. “Then it’s settled. Nobody else need know.”

“It’s a damn shame anyone need know.” Genrou mused, as he watched Rin’an run off towards the house. “But she’s okay. Shit, in there, that was the only damn thing that mattered. Even if they drive me nuts — I guess I’m still so conditioned that they’re my blood an’ I protect them.”

A wry smile touched his lips, and he ran his fingers once more through his wild, wavy hair.

“Kashira’d say I was playin’ the wolf — protectin’ my pack an’ my territory from harm.” He realised. “Shit, maybe he’d be right. Annoyin’ as they are — naggin’ as they are… I don’t want ‘em to come to harm. I’m done livin’ with them — the last few days has taught me that clear enough. But I’ll still protect them. An’ if that’s somethin’ I can do with Suzaku’s damn mark blazin’ on my arm, then dammit, it’s somethin’ I’m goin’ to do!”

The Kutou soldiers’ training camps were moving ever closer to the border.

Hou Jun slipped his *kasa* back into its usual travel position, settling himself more comfortably in the branches of a nearby tree as he scoured the land below. For the past few days since his departure from Seisen he had found himself tracking the progress of Kutou’s military forces as their camps pushed closer and closer to the South. Though they were still within Kutou’s own territory, Hou Jun knew that the weakest point in the Kounan border was less than a mile to the west, and from the looks of the travelling party, this was not a trip designed for negotiation.

Below him were gathered an armed force of approximately two hundred men, each wearing the same basic armour yet as he eyed them more carefully, Hou Jun was able to make out the different insignias that divided them into ranks and regiments. In the midst of the melee, a man who was clearly in charge was barking out orders, and as he strained his ears to listen, Hou Jun distinctly heard the man berating a group of young soldiers for not being quicker to their tasks. As he listened, it became clear to the eavesdropping monk that although this was a force sent from Kutou’s capital, it was not yet an entirely cohesive one, and that many of the men did not yet know one another’s faces. They were a force formed since the failure to subdue Seisen, he realised, and that was something he could probably use to his advantage.

He scanned the campsite once more, committing its layout to memory as he contemplated his next course of action. To one side, an immense, tent-like structure was being erected, and Hou Jun knew from his travelling experience that this was most likely a shelter from the elements under which the bulk of the common men would be forced to spend the night. To the right, a smaller, more sturdy tent had already been put up, and this, Hou Jun surmised wryly, would most probably house the few higher ranking officers sent to command this motley crew into a proper fighting force. Blue flags featuring the distinctive emblem of Kutou and the dragon Seiryuu flew from its top, and at intervals around the camp's border, similar markers told any curious peasantry that to trespass would most likely mean death.

Even within their own land, Hou Jun had seen enough of Seiryuu's Shougun not to doubt that if it came to the protection of the army, not even the most innocent of lost children would be treated with mercy.

And of course, just over the rise lay land to which Seiryuu had even less claim and for which he had even less inclination to protect.

"*Kutou are by nature the strongest of the four lands, because their resources are more balanced and they have plentiful water and fertile soil.*"

As he gazed down at the bustling men, suddenly Hou Jun heard his father's voice echoing in his head, and he frowned, remembering the first time he had heard the stories associated with the Eastern land. He had been a boy, he recalled, no older than eleven or twelve, and his father, back from a long day's work in Souen, had taken a moment from his busy schedule to answer one of his eldest child's questions about his work.

"After all, Hou Jun, one day it will be up to you to understand all these things." He had said, clamping his hand down warmly on his son's shoulder, and absently Hou Jun's fingers reached up to brush the top of his left limb, half imagining he could still feel the man's gentle touch giving him encouragement now.

"You'll understand better as time goes on, but Kounan isn't an island. The relationships it forms with its neighbours are a big part of its own success — and here, in the Northern Province, we have to be aware of that. It's a long way from Eiyou, after all. You've seen the traders who apply for permits from Hokkan and Kutou to enter Souen and Choukou and trade their wares there. As City Officials we're representatives of the Emperor and we must keep in mind at all times the political significance of accepting or rejecting an application."

He had smiled, then, and Hou Jun's own lips twitched into a wistful

smile as he remembered his father's expression.

"All the four lands are different, Hou Jun, but its people are much the same." He had continued. "In times of peace, they live, have families, trade goods and build a future for their children. In peace, we are all the same. That's why the Emperor strives so hard to keep peace in Kounan, and outside it. Kounan are a small country, after all. Their neighbours are better kept as friends than as enemies."

"Is Kutou Kounan's enemy, then?" Hou Jun had asked him, and his father had laughed, shaking his head.

"No, not yet, and I pray it never will come to that." He had replied gently. "But you should always remember that a powerful neighbour can be a dangerous one, and provoking them into becoming an enemy is always unwise. Kutou have not yet turned their attentions towards the South, but they have the power to cause problems for any country, if they so choose. The last time they launched an invasion, it was to the North, and only Genbu no Miko and her companions managed to prevent an all out tragedy. Remember all of this, Hou Jun, for the day when you take your position in the Emperor's web. The job we do as officials in cities like Souen are just as important peacekeeping posts as the ones Council officials hold in the capital itself — don't ever let yourself think otherwise. We may live in villages and we may not have all the perks of Eiyou on our doorstep. But we are just as important and just as valued members of Government — and one day I will be relying on you to take my place and keep our long history of good relations going strong."

Hou Jun closed his eyes, pushing the memory away.

"You didn't imagine that it would be like this that I'd be carrying out that wish." He reflected ruefully. "It's funny, Father. I've tried so long not to remember things about my family. But now, when Kounan is poised on the brink of danger, your words come back to me. Whether I'm in Eiyou with Saihitei-sama's blessing or here, a lone monk in the field trying to do my bit… I can't hesitate. Even if it's frightening, or dangerous, or my confidence wants to fail. I have to protect Kounan. All that time with Taiitsukun — I must try. Which means… using my magic and hoping I can infiltrate this organised chaos in some way or another."

His lips thinned as he pondered the chances of the border patrols being able to keep out a strong raiding force. Beyond the rise, he knew, villages much like his own and like Seisen thrived in ignorance of the danger just past their boundaries and as he contemplated the situation, he realised that they would put up very little fight.

“Trained by that Shougun, Kutou’s forces are something to be feared.” He reflected grimly, leaping deftly down from his perch as he brought his fingers up before his place, muttering an incantation as he shifted his features to better resemble one of the milling blue-armoured soldiers. “This is the threat that Suzaku wants us to protect Kounan from, sure enough. Just like with Seisen, Nakago will act in whatever way best suits his ends. And if that means killing Kounan’s innocents, so be it.”

He glanced at his hands, a sudden flash of doubt touching his heart.

“*Can* I do this?” He wondered. “Can I walk right in there, infiltrate their ranks and make them believe I’m one of them long enough to discover which villages they seek to harm? I might not be able to stop the raids, but if I can get warning to Eiyou… the Emperor will do something, I’m certain. But, acting alone, is my magic up to it? I don’t have Nyan Nyan to call on for help here, and I don’t have any of Suzaku’s fellow warriors to back me up. If that Shougun is here, with the power he possesses, he’ll find me out in a moment. But even if he isn’t… do I have the confidence to brazen my way in there?”

“What are you doing out here, soldier?”

A voice startled him to his senses and he jerked his head up, meeting the gaze of the officer that he had earlier observed from his tree-top perch. The man was clearly around twice Hou Jun’s own age, with the starts of a pot belly beneath his faded blue uniform, and a straggly beard of gray-streaked hair covering a broad-set chin. Close up he seemed even more lop-sided and unappealing in appearance than he had from a distance, but Hou Jun swallowed his instinctive dislike of this stranger, remembering ruefully that he was in no position to be judging people on appeaances. The Captain’s eyes were dark and beady, and as he met them, Hou Jun was immediately aware of their emptiness, realising that this was a man whose soul had been battered into obedience and efficiency with military precision. The work of Nakago, he reflected absently. Seiryuu’s chosen warrior had far reaching hands, for even though he was not present in person, his influence still lingered somehow over the camp.

“Well?” The man snapped out now. “Answer me, man. Are you thinking of deserting? Because Seiryuu help you if you are. Shougun won’t forgive any more cowards who go running off to flooded villages, and he’ll slay you soon as look at you if that’s your plan.”

Hou Jun stared at him for a moment, realising that his decision had been made for him. For a moment fear flooded through him, as he stretched out cautious senses for any sign of the blond haired

Shougun's distinctive, overpowering chi.

There was no sign of it, however, and somehow this gave Hou Jun strength. He gathered his wits, Taiitsukun's words ringing in his ears as he snapped to attention, saluting the officer smartly and hoping beyond hope that he'd judged the situation correctly.

"No sir. Sorry sir. I was just takin' a moment to relieve myself in the bushes, sir." He said frankly, twisting his tones into a more Eastern dialect as he adopted the manner of speech of the soldiers he had met during his travels East.

"Relieve yourself, huh?" The officer looked suspicious. "I don't know your face… where are you from? Your colours suggest you're from the fifth patrol — is that right?"

"Drafted from the capital, sir." Hou Jun pulled together his thoughts quickly, offering the man a respectful smile as he made no attempt to slacken his stance. "Sent to cover the border raids on the Southern Lands, order of the Shougun Nakago, sir. Fifth patrol is my assignment, sir… awaiting further orders."

"Name?"

"Ri, sir. Ri."

"Ri, huh?" The officer eyed him again, then sighed, spreading his shoulders. "Shit, sending all these new bloods who don't have a clue and expecting me to pull them together. The Shougun sure has confidence in his training. Well, Ri. Now you've had your little rendezvous with the bushes, I suggest you get your ass in gear and go join your fellows setting up camp for the night. Tomorrow we march on the border, an' I won't tolerate any slacking from anyone, new in uniform or otherwise. You understand me?"

"Yes, sir. I understand, sir." Hou Jun saluted again smartly, although inwardly his heart clenched at the suddenness of the Eastern army's plans. Tomorrow… that didn't give him enough time even to send a message to the capital. Yet, even as he withdrew in the direction the officer had pointed, he knew he could not abandon the villagers to suffer a bloody fate.

"I saw enough war in the Eastern territories during my trips there to know its not something I want to see happen to my own countryfolk." He decided resolutely, falling into the rhythmic step of a soldier who was used to the routine of cross-country marches. "Which means that I have to be here, now. I have to stay with Kutou's people and hope that Suzaku no Miko doesn't choose this moment to come

back to Kounan. When she does, I'll have to worry about protecting her from harm. But right now, this is more pressing. There are young children in those villages, and tomorrow they'll see horrors no child should ever see. Unless I can do something about it. Unless…"

His thoughts trailed off as he reached the cluster of soldiers who, like the uniform he had affected, bore the insignia of the fifth regiment on their armour. At the sight of him, one of them raised an arm in a wave.

"Yo! You're one of us, huh? Shit, did you get lost or something? We've been sloggin' our guts out on the Captain's orders an' you've been what, taking a nap?"

"I've just arrived from the capital, with one of the battallions of reinforcements." Hou Jun lied easily, twitching his face into an apologetic expression as he shrugged his shoulders. "It was a long trip. What can I say? A guy's gotta do what a guy's gotta do… Captain said we were settin' up camp. Think it's really true, that tomorrow we're marching on Kounan?"

"That's the brief." A second soldier said frankly, tossing a hammer in Hou Jun's direction, and the Seishi caught it deftly, glancing at it then holding his hand out for the supports that would pull the makeshift travel covers together into one protective shield. "Why? Got cold feet? This be your first battle, will it? You look green enough."

"I'm eager to see action." Hou Jun settled himself alongside his new companions, watching them for a moment before imitating their technique in pulling the shield into place. "That's all. Bein' cooped up in the capital training is one thing, but I was glad to get out here. This is real, you know? Nothing like back there."

"Well, the Shougun's games ain't games, if you know what I mean." The first man laughed ruefully. "Anything he's taught us, we'll die before we dare forget it. Kounan'd do better to surrender now — they don't want to face the kind of force that guy's capable of wielding."

"What do you expect?" The second man demanded. "Seiryuu's chosen, ain't he? One of Kutou's blessed. What the hell chance do Kounan have of stopping us when we have the force of the God behind us?"

"I heard that story, too." Hou Jun paused for a moment, pursing his lips. "That Seiryuu no Miko truly is coming to save Kutou."

"Well, so goes the tale." The first man grinned. "Hey, rookie, what's your name? Guess you'll be beddin' down with us tonight, so we

might as well know who we're gonna be pushin' about to do errands an' shit when the sun goes down. Tradition of the troops, after all — that the new guy gets all the shit jobs."

"Ri." Hou Jun said simply. "And you?"

"Gou." The man beamed, holding out a fat fist to clap Hou Jun on the shoulder. "And this is Kin. So now you know."

"Guess so." Hou Jun agreed, sitting back on his heels. "Do you think it's real? This Miko stuff? I mean, from another world… do you think it can really happen?"

"Well, there's other tales about, you know." Kin said with a shrug. "Ain't you heard them? You must've been sheltered. Stories go that Hokkan an' Sairou both had wenches appear an' wishes granted by the Gods that protect them. Why not Kutou too? Besides, there's also a bad rumour that Kounan's doin' the same as we are. That they're lookin' to raise Suzaku just as sure as we'll be goin' after Seiryuu. That's why we have to stop them. They're the enemy, right? That's why tomorrow can't come quick enough… we'll show them what the Shougun's troops are capable of."

"Suzaku, huh." Despite himself, Hou Jun glanced up at the sky, absently wondering if he and his Seishi brethren would truly find a way to make the Phoenix arc over the southern sky. "That would be one hell of a frightening sight, wouldn't it?"

"Bloody big bird like that? No kidding." Gou nodded. "But don't you worry your head, rookie. It'll be fine. Big as he might be, Suzaku's still only a bird. An' Seiryuu's the kind o' dragon that'll eat him for breakfast. Carnivore, you see."

He laughed at his own joke.

"But if they have sense, those Southerners will surrender when they see the force we have, an' they'll hand over their Miko to the Shougun an' the Emperor." He added casually. "Their Emperor's barely more than a baby himself, after all."

"I see." Hou Jun digested this carefully. Then he shrugged, offering them a smile.

"Then I guess tomorrow will be a piece of cake, won't it?"

"You kidding?" Kin smirked. "We're raiding common land tomorrow. They won't know what hit them. We won't even take a scratch. Trust me."

Chapter 10

Chapter Nine

Perhaps it was an omen.

With a dry smile touching his lips, Nakago gazed up at the sky over his head, taking in the dark, clustering clouds that had massed over Kutou that morning. The sun of the past few days was nowhere in evidence and there was a damp haze in the air which indicated that rain was not far away. Ahead of him, the huge gateposts of the central Kaiga estate loomed out of the brush and forestland, slabs of cold blue marble on which Nakago could clearly make out two distinct logos.

The crest of the Emperor and the seal of the Kaiga-ke.

Derision touched his expression as he drew his black steed to a halt, and the mare let out a whinny, pawing the damp ground as if uncomfortable stopping on this land. Absently putting a hand to her neck to calm her, Nakago could understand the beast's uncertainty. Wisps and threads of souls seemed to drift on the wind, shredded by the cold atmosphere of death and fear that hung heavy over the Kaiga manor, and despite himself, the Shougun frowned.

He did not like coming to this place. Deep within him, memories still stirred of the day his own people had faced destruction, and the haunting whispers on the wind were vivid enough for his strong spiritual senses to draw them in. He had no time for the past, or for dwelling on people who were dead and gone. But it was hard, in a place like this, to maintain his ice cold composure.

Still, he curbed his impatience, turning his seiran gaze on the estate that lay beyond the immense gateposts. He was here, after all, with a very specific mission, and he had no mind to fail. After all, though Shoukitei did not yet know it, Nakago had already found his blessed Miko. And, little by little he had begun to put his plans into play, gently and carefully moulding the gullible child into a resentful force through which he could carry out his ultimate revenge on Kutou.

Such a thing was easy, after all, for a man of Nakago's spiritual calibre.

He pressed his feet gently to the horse's withers, urging her into a slow trot as he advanced purposefully towards the guarded gates. The sentries on duty stood back and saluted at the sight of the dragon's

crest on his helmet, and Nakago allowed himself a smile of derision as he nodded in vague acknowledgment of their presence. They were so naïve, he reflected. They saw the dragon's form on his armour and automatically they assumed that the man wearing it had sworn his heart and soul to Seiryuu. But Nakago knew better. The mark of the heart appeared on his brow when he fought, but it was the only heart to which he lay claim these days. Within his chest beat a tool of existence, not a vessel of life or hope. And Seiryuu may have branded him with his soul, but Nakago had worked very hard to eradicate all traces of his own human soul from his countenance. He had his objectives and he would follow them… only rage and revenge drove him on.

The pathway to the Kaiga manor was a long and winding one, but Nakago's horse was equal to it, even despite her swift ride from the palace. She was, in some ways, his best soldier, he reflected ruefully, as he paused at the main door, dismounting and running his fingers through her mane. She never shirked her duty, nor did she protest at the bloodthirstiness of his warfare. She was his slave, he realised with disdain. And he was the Emperor's. At least for now.

As he approached the building, the door swung back, and Nakago met the gaze of a young man, his eyes flat and un-enquiring as he gazed on the man dressed in Seiryuu's uniform. This man was also a slave, Nakago knew that — the fading scar on his cheek and the ragged nature of his robe were indication enough. But Nakago could also read past the stranger's appearance, and he could tell all to easily that beneath those soil-besmirched fabrics were the criss-crossing weal marks of a master's whip. This man was a tribesman, just as Nakago had once been. But Nakago was not here to pay attention to the sufferance of other slaves.

"I have come to see Kaiga Gin." He said softly. "On my Emperor's orders. Tell him so."

The slave did not speak, merely bowing his head and retreating into the hallways beyond as swiftly and as silently as he had come. Nakago removed his helmet, setting it down on a nearby unit as he leant up against the wall, eying the vivid décor and expensive surroundings with a feeling of revulsion. This was a house built on as much blood as the Imperial Palace, and the scent in the air was just as dank and fetid as it was in the dungeons below Shoukitei's throne room.

"Well, Shougun. This is an honour."

At that moment Gin himself appeared, the slave trailing behind him in silence as if waiting for a further command.

“I suppose you have come on Shoukitei-heika’s bidding…?”

“What other purpose do I have in doing anything but to serve the Emperor, Kaiga-sama.” Nakago bowed his head, his blue eyes empty as he raised his gaze once more to the greedy black ones of the manor’s lord. “I believe you have some men who are keen to sign up to fight in Shoukitei-heika’s name… I am instructed to come here and ready them. They will need to be trained, after all.”

“My staff will assist you in that regard.” Gin told him, and Nakago sensed the dismissive condescension in the nobleman’s tones. He was talking to his Emperor’s chief Military Officer, Nakago reflected ironically, yet he still saw before him a tribal Hin no better than any of his own shackled slaves. The concept amused him rather than offended him — that a man could be so ignorant and yet wield so much political power seemed to epitomise Kutou’s governmental style.

Gin did not see the faint flicker of cold humour stir in the depths of Nakago’s gaze, however, for he had wheeled on the shadowy slave, bringing his hand down hard across the young man’s cheek and sending him staggering back against the wall with the force of the blow. Fresh blood spilled from the unfortunate youth’s lip, making a stark contrast to the chalkiness of his skin, and Nakago eyed the youngster in faint interest. During his years at court he had heard every superstition possible relating to all the persecuted peoples in Kutou, and how they were abnormal beings cast below ordinary folk in their design. Yet right here was the proof of their humanity, as Nakago reasoned that even the marble pallor of the Meihi people drew red blood.

“Why are you hesitating there!” Gin seemed unconcerned by the damage he had caused the young slave, glaring at him in annoyance. “Did you not hear me? Go fetch Housei at once — at once! Useless, lingering fool — you are here to work, not waste time in laziness!”

The slave stared for a moment at his master, then got slowly to his feet. He did not cower back in fear, Nakago noted, and a grudging amount of respect rose inside of him as he watched the thin, pale-skinned figure withdraw once more into the hallways as if nothing untoward had occurred. Gin was strong, despite his flabbiness, and probably capable of snapping his workers like twigs if he so chose. Yet even despite that, the slave had raised not even the faintest murmur.

A strong heart or a broken one? Nakago did not know.

“I am riding to the palace myself within the hour.” Gin turned his attention back to Nakago. “I have business with the Emperor which I

would rather not convey by other men's lips. You may stay as long as you need to conduct your affairs — I trust that is all you need from the Kaiga Estate this morning, Nakago."

"I have my orders, Kaiga-sama." Nakago agreed evenly. "I will follow them and then return to barracks as agreed."

"Then Housei will be able to tell you the men who have given their names already, and anything else you require." Gin assured him casually. "Ah, where is that slave? The devil's curse of laziness is on those Meihi, I swear — they drag their feet in deliberate spite to our orders. If only I had some of your people to work my Estate, Shougun — although I suppose your like are hard to come by these days."

"My like…" Nakago murmured, reaching up a hand to touch his forehead as he felt the spreading warmth of Seiryuu's power beneath his skin. "Yes. I suppose we are."

He bowed his head.

"You flatter me and my people also with your comments, Lord Gin." He said softly, knowing that the nobleman was too thick-skinned to pick up the irony in his tone. "I pray you have a safe ride to the palace… I believe rain is coming."

"A man of Kutou's noble blood does not fear a little rain." Gin laughed heartily at this. "Ah, but then I suppose… you aren't built like we are, are you?"

"I fear not." Nakago agreed. "As you have correctly observed, I am Hin."

"But one born with some wits, at the very least." Gin reflected. "At least, Shoukitei-sama believes so. I'm sure he has less trouble keeping you in line than I do my motley bunch of stragglers."

"I am my Emperor's man, body and soul." Nakago said evenly. "As should all people in Kutou be, whatever their tribe."

"Well, I wish you'd tell that to my slaves in my absence." Gin grumbled, completely missing the double entendre in his companion's carefully chosen words. "Maybe they'd take it from a clansman like you. In any case, I mustn't tarry. See to your business, Nakago. In Shoukitei-sama's name I entrust my men to you."

With that he was gone, long robes flapping at his podgy legs as he stomped along the hallway, and Nakago watched him go with a faint sense of distaste. Gin was too stupid and arrogant a man to be successfully baited with clever wordplay, this he knew, and although

he cared very little for the fate of men beneath his command, something in the Lord's attitude towards him had kindled his own scorn.

"One day I will probably kill you… you and your '*kind*'." He reflected absently. "You truly have no idea how much I have my wits about me, Kaiga-sama. This is your failing. This is *Kutou's* failing. But one day, it will learn."

The sound of footsteps alerted him to another's presence and he turned, expecting to see the Kaiga's slave-master and chief of household staff emerging from the end of the hall. Instead, however, he met the gaze of a young woman who faltered, staring at him in consternation as she took in his appearance and his attire. For a moment nothing was said, then, slowly, the woman bowed her head.

"I'm sorry." She murmured. "If my husband is conducting… if this is business of the Emperor's, I…"

She faltered, raising her gaze to his again, and Nakago frowned, eying this stranger keenly.

She was not like Gin, somehow, he realised. From her appearance she was half the Lord's age, closer to Nakago's own age of twenty five than Gin's middling fifties. She was pretty, yet weakness and uncertainty competed for dominance in her dark eyes, and though she was dressed in all the fine trinkets of a Lady of the Manor, her bearing and demeanour seemed uncomfortable and self-conscious, as though she wished she could hide herself in the shadows of the rambling Kaiga hall. In an instant, Nakago realised that this was the woman about whom Gin often made lewd and inappropriate references when in company with the Emperor — the younger sister of the Southern landowner, Kaiga Ruiren. Although she had been married to the Eastern lord for almost seven years now, she had never appeared at the Imperial court, and consequently this was the first time he had set eyes on the woman who was apparently going to provide the Kaigas of the future.

A flicker of a smile touched his lips as he assessed her, as the malicious threads of a plan began to weave themselves together inside his mind. Kaiga Gin was a fool and a braggart, a bully and a thug. Although it would be easy to kill such a man and obliterate him without a trace, Nakago knew there would be very little enjoyment in such an act. He was a man who deserved to suffer before he died, and here before him was a much more tantalising way to undermine and destroy not only the Lord but the entirety of the house of Kaiga. Few noble houses supported Shoukitei in the way that the Kaiga-ke did —

and it had not escaped Nakago's attention that in order for him to complete his plans in Kutou, he would also have to do something about their grasping for power.

And for the first time since he had encountered his Emperor's close ally, Nakago realised there was a way to hurt Gin's line after all.

"Kaiga Gin wishes to produce an heir to inherit this death pit when he is too old and fat to keep breathing." He mused inwardly. "Yet his wife is this creature — young, frightened, and no doubt easy to bend. I wonder what amusement I might use her for — in the name of spiting that creature who hangs onto Shoukitei's every word looking for crumbs."

He glanced at his hands, weighing up the situation carefully.

"What would he say, I wonder, if she were forced to child-bear an infant with *tribal* blood." He reflected. "Imagine if such a *tainted* child was to be the heir to which he left his every *ryou*? Even if he knew it, to admit it would be to admit being cuckolded by a slave. Yet to not admit it would be to accept a tribal child into the Kaiga-ke. Such a thing would be the destruction of the whole line — a slow, rotting influence from the inside out. And I, of all people… I can cast that curse on this house. I have that power, along with many others. This woman is weak. She cannot fight me. And I can prevail."

He cast another glance at the young woman, who still stood there, eying him uncertainly. In this moment he made up his mind. He would steal her honour, and therefore Gin's… and make him a laughing stock before the court.

For a moment the thought of taking her by force crossed his mind, for she was clearly fragile enough to put up no fight should he choose to abduct her from the manor and deflower her against her will. Just as quickly, however, the image of his mother flashed through his thoughts, and from somewhere deep inside of him he was almost sure he could hear her scream. Despite himself, his heart clenched, frustration welling up inside him as he realised the moment was gone. Though he had closed his mind to the many abuses Shoukitei had inflicted on him since the destruction of the Hin tribe, he had not been entirely able to quash the memory of his mother's death, and now, as he narrowed his gaze, he knew that his moment for overpowering Ruiren had gone. He sighed, realising that if he was going to use her in any way to destroy the Kaiga family, it would not be by physical brute force.

"Ruiren-sama." He murmured, dropping before her, and the woman

let out a gasp of surprise, holding up her hands as she shook her head hurriedly.

“Please, you don’t have to… to bow.” She said hastily. “I am not… you are… you’re from the Emperor, and…”

“I am a Hin.” Nakago gazed up at her, the deceptive innocence in his blue eyes masking his feelings of annoyance at his own weakness. “I should bow before a native born lady of Kutou. The Emperor would not have me act any other way.”

“But you are… the Shougun. Aren’t you?” Ruiren whispered, taking a hesitant step towards him as she did so, and Nakago nodded.

“You know of me, then?” He asked faintly, and Ruiren nodded.

“Gin… has spoken of you.” She agreed, awkwardness touching her expression. “Of the… the Hin Shougun who Shoukitei-heika relies on for all his military things. You are him, aren’t you? That Shougun. The one… blessed by Seiryuu.”

“Blessed…” Nakago’s lips twitched into a humourless smile. “I am Nakago, if that is your question. The stellar sign ‘*kokoro*’ appears on my brow — if that is to be blessed by the Dragon then yes, it seems I am blessed.”

He got to his feet, lowering his head once more in deference to her.

“We have not had the pleasure of a prior acquaintance.” He said smoothly. “Though I have met your husband on many occasions.”

Ruiren’s eyes became stricken at this, and she swallowed hard, twisting her hands together as she did so.

“I’m sorry.” She whispered, and despite himself Nakago’s eyes widened in surprise.

“Sorry…?”

“My husband…” Ruiren faltered, then, “My husband is not kind… towards people from… tribes.”

Nakago stared at her for a moment, not quite believing what he had heard. Then he laughed, shaking his head in amusement.

“Kaiga-sama has caused me no harm, so your apology is quite unnecessary.” He said easily. “I am Shoukitei-heika’s man, therefore I am beyond his touch. He cannot hurt me, and he does not.”

“I see.” Ruiren looked relieved. “Well, then I am glad. He has… a strong way of putting his views, sometimes.”

Nakago eyed her more carefully, taking in the shadowy eyes and the faint bruising that marked her cheek. In a moment he understood, and slowly he shook his head.

“I am not afraid of him.” He responded evenly. “A man who hits his wife is not someone a Shougun fears.”

Ruiren’s eyes became huge, and she gaped at him, horror in her expression. Nakago smiled.

“You are as much a slave as I am, perhaps.” He reflected. “Or more, even, in your own way. I have a good deal of freedom in the life I have been given, and I will use it to the best of my ability to serve Kutou. There are many things that need doing here, and it is my job as Seiryuu’s representative to ensure that they are done. This is the duty the God has charged me with. Do you think I would not notice if one of Kutou’s people was being so abused?”

“I…” Ruiren faltered, and Nakago shook his head.

“You don’t need to speak.” He assured her, moulding his tones into more gentle, soothing ones as he realised what kind of a person he was dealing with. “I understand the things you don’t have to say. The Dragon gave me the power to sense other people’s distress… you don’t need to speak it for me to understand.”

“Shougun…”

Ruiren faltered, then,

“Do you think Seiryuu can truly save Kutou?”

“That depends on whether or not Seiryuu no Miko comes here, my Lady, and assembles my brethren in time.” Nakago said evenly. “But believe me, I have no intentions of giving up on changing Kutou. I will achieve it, one way or another… it is my duty.”

“And the Emperor’s will?”

“The Emperor will surely understand Seiryuu’s will as clearly as I do, when the Miko is here.” Nakago said cryptically. “I am not afraid of him, either — I am not afraid of anyone on this Earth, because I have a higher calling. They cannot hurt me, Ruiren-sama. No matter what they do. But I do not think they seek to. Suzaku threatens this land also, and we are united in the fight to bring him down. We *will* bring him down, I have faith in that — we will defeat Suzaku and save Kutou by the grace of the Azure Dragon’s magic.”

“I wish I was so strong and decisive about things as that.” Ruiren murmured, and Nakago narrowed his eyes, judging the girl’s

fluctuating aura as he made up his mind. Gently he reached out to touch her hand, startling her gaze back to his as he offered her a smile.

“If you ever need help finding that strength, send a message to me the palace.” He said softly. “I will not forget, Ruiren-sama. This is not a place for a pretty lady to spend her days… remember that I am bound to Seiryuu, and I will not forget.”

“Shougun…?” Ruiren stared, and Nakago’s smile widened as he released his grip on her hand.

“I have work to do for my Emperor.” He said simply. “I must assemble and train his forces and I must not delay. We will not fight Suzaku’s people unprepared… so I must go.”

“Shougun!”

A man’s voice came from the other end of the hallway at that moment, and Nakago turned, bowing his head towards Housei with a sense of triumph in his empty heart.

“I have come as my Emperor ordered, to speak to those of your men with courage enough to fight.” He said evenly. “If you will take me to them, Housei-san, I will introduce them to the soldier’s world. After all, once you hold a sword in Kutou’s name… there is no going back.”

“An’ now you know why it is I don’t like you traipsin’ round the place waving a sword.”

As his mother finished her tirade, Genrou cast her a resigned look, folding his arms across his chest as he leant up against the main wall-beams of the Kou farmstead. It was late that evening and, after having returned from Souun to discover the bloody mess in the barn and the end result of Genrou’s desperate fight with the stranger, it had taken a whole family effort to clean and straighten things out to the way they should be. The man’s body had been dragged from the building and buried beneath the tree at the furthest-most point of the farm, and it was only now, after everything had died down that Genrou’s mother had finally let rip her true feelings.

“But he would have raped Rin’an.” He said now, knowing that he was talking in circles but seeing no way to avoid it. “He was damn serious, Ma. I ain’t kiddin’. He would’ve taken her an’ probably killed her too, judgin’ by the twisted way he went at her. What the hell else could I do? If I’d had my sword I could’a dealt with it quicker. It’s just

a good thing I've spent so much time on the mountain learnin' about how to fight. Otherwise God knows what might've happened."

"Shun'u's right." To his surprise, Rin'an herself spoke up from her corner. "If he hadn't been there, Ma…"

She faltered, and Genrou frowned, noticing that the girl's colour was still not entirely back to normal and that the whole event had shaken her more deeply than she had been willing to admit.

At this, the old farmer's wife sighed, shaking her head in defeat.

"Suzaku knows you always bring trouble to this farm, Shun'u." She murmured. "An' find a way of chasin' it off again, too. I'm glad you protected your sister — At least you seem to have some idea of your duty as our son, t'protect your sisters an' us from harm. But dammit, you could've thought it over more carefully. If you'd taken this man… the local officials would'a wanted him an' maybe paid a reward, seein' as these people've been sniffin' around lookin' for trouble the past few weeks."

Genrou frowned, absently rubbing his bandaged arm.

"That wouldn't have worked." He said simply. "He was sick in the head, Ma — he'd have probably run someone through before I'd had a chance to stop him. Besides… he saw me. He knew… who I was."

"What do you mean, who you are?" Aidou demanded sharply, and Genrou held up his arm.

"This." He said evenly. "Tasuki. That's what he called me. He knew."

For a moment there was silence, then,

"Noone has *ever* said you were Tasuki." His mother said in low tones. "You may have that damned mark, Shun'u, but *noone* has ever called you by that name in this house. An' how did he come to discover that, anyhow? What if his friend also knows? What have you been doin' — I *told* you to keep it covered!"

"I have!" Genrou defended himself. "I've been real careful. But when we were fightin', the bandage came off. An' then he saw it. I can't stop it from appearin' when I'm fightin' or whatever — it just happens, an' I ain't got control of it. So he saw it. An' he knew."

"So you killed him." Manka said softly. Genrou started, then shook his head.

"I didn't kill him because he saw it." He said stiffly. "I killed him

because he tried to rape Rin'an an' I wasn't goin' to let him have a second chance to try again."

"If you care so much about protectin' us, then why did you take off up the mountain this morning?" Aidou asked archly, and Genrou bit his lip, knowing the question had been coming since Manka had spilled the whole story out to her older sister on the girl's return to the farm. "Why did you sneak out, if you're so worried about protecting all of us from danger?"

"I was only goin' to go check on my buddy." Genrou retorted. "That's all. It was early an' I thought those guys had gone. Noone'd seen them, right? So I thought it was all right. I was comin' back to the farm — I jus' wanted to see how the Kashira was. It ain't my fault if someone decides to pick that moment to assault someone, is it? I came back an' I got him — can't we just leave it at that? Rin'an is safe an' the guy's not goin' to be tellin' anyone what's branded on my arm, so everyone's all right. Now it's over, in any case. It's done with. Right? I've done my duty by my family an' I can go."

"What if the other one comes back?" Rin'an asked softly, and Genrou shook his head.

"He's after *me*." He said grimly. "Not you. That other one, he had other things buzzin' round his brain an' he wanted you too, Rin'an. But they were sent here to find me. To kill me. That guy said as much. That so long as I stayed around the farm I was only goin' to bring shit down on your head. Like Ma said, I bring trouble here. This time I really did. So this time I'm leavin' the farm because of that. If he finds out who I am, well, I won't be here for him to antagonise. So he won't need to come find any of you… it will be me he'll look for. An' if he does, well, I'll take care of him, too."

"Stop saying it like that." Aidou snapped.

"Like what?" Genrou looked blank, and Aidou's brows knitted together.

"Who I am." She murmured. "You keep on sayin' it. '*Who I am*'. You're *Shun'u*, dammit. Kou Shun'u. You ain't anyone else. That thing on your arm… it may be Suzaku's mark but it ain't who you are. An' you've never said it like that before… you've never referred to it as that."

"Aidou's right." His mother said softly, even as Genrou opened his eyes wide in surprise. "You've said it twice since we've started this conversation. I won't have it, Shun'u. You're not Suzaku's sacrifice. You're my son — drum that into your head, because it's the truth.

You're my boy an' nothin' else."

"I never said I was Tasuki. Or that I felt like I was Tasuki." Genrou gathered his wits, shaking his head. "I'm Kou Shun'u — all right, that's somethin' I can't escape so long as you people an' the farm is here. An' I will protect you — I did this time, an' I will again. But I'm Genrou of Reikaku-zan an' I have things to do there. Tasuki ain't any of it. I didn't mean it the way it sounded. It's just who they think I am, so…"

He sighed, rubbing his temples.

"I ain't stayin'." He repeated. "I'll leave tonight, whilst it's dark. I know where I'm headin', an' the sooner I go the less likely any of this will come back on you all. Genrou has things to do now… for the Kashira, I gotta. That's what matters to me most right now. Reikaku-zan an' the guys there. They're countin' on me too… I don't have time to be Tasuki an' I can't waste any more days hangin' around here."

"So you're goin' to leave us to handle the mess?" Aidou asked archly, and Genrou grimaced at her.

"I buried the body, Neechan. The barn is clean. It's over. There's no mess to deal with."

"An' what about if they want to know about someone bein' killed on our farm?"

"Aidou-chan…" The soft tones of their father broke through the conversation at that moment, startling all of them into realising the old farmer was there. In the ensuing silence, the man smiled, slowly shaking his head.

"A thief broke into our farm and tried to assault one of my daughters." He said quietly. "My son accosted the thief and he was killed in the struggle. No official will take issue with that. This is our land, and our boy defended that land. Not to mention Rin'an's honour."

"But Pa…" Aidou stared at him in confusion, and the farmer spread his hands.

"Shun'u is right." He added. "He needs to go. If his friend needs him now, then he has to help as best he can."

"But what about the farm? And us?" Manka demanded. "What about him needing to be here to do the things you can't do, Father?"

"Shun'u knows where his home is." The old man said comfortably. "And he'll never fly too far from it. Besides, if these people are looking

for him, it's better he deals with them without us being in his way. I'm sure more than anyone else Shun'u doesn't want to see any of his family get hurt."

"Pa…" Genrou stared at his father for a moment, then he grinned, nodding his head.

"Damn right." He agreed. "An' don't think I'll let any more creepy would-be rapists come stalkin' round here, neither. But I gotta go to the Shouryuu an' find Kashira a doctor… he's real sick an' he needs my help too. So I need to go… an' I need to see what I can find up North."

A long pause greeted this statement, then his mother sighed, and Genrou knew the argument had been won.

"Then don't do anything stupid enough to get yourself killed." She said frankly. "Your sword is in our chamber — if you must go, I suppose you must. But don't get any stupid ideas in your head about playin' the hero — you got it? I don't want my son growin' up to leave a trail of blood in his wake."

"Believe me, I ain't lookin' to spill any blood." Genrou assured her. "An' you guys take care of yourselves, too. If anyone else invades the farm, send Aidou out to punch 'em with her fist… she's sharp enough to lay out any bandit!"

With this cheeky parting remark, he darted out of the room, ignoring his sister's angry yell as he hurried to claim his sword from his parents' chamber. His heart felt light all of a sudden, and he realised that it was relief coursing through his veins.

"Now I can go to the Shouryuu an' find a doctor who can help cure Kashira's fever." He muttered to himself. "Hang on in there, Hakurou-sama! I won't let you down, I swear!"

Chapter 11

Chapter Ten

Dawn.

Hou Jun stepped out into the rising sunshine, his expression one of preoccupation as he cast his gaze over the Kutou landscape. In a few hours, he knew, the motley band of men were planning on launching an assault on the unsuspecting Suzaku villages that fell just on the other side of the divide, and despite his desire to play along with the soldiers, he had found it hard to sleep. His first impulse had been to flee to Eiyou in the hope of getting aid, but as he had thought it out he realised that there was no way he could use his power to transport that many of Kounan's armed forces to the requisite place in time to prevent innocent bloodshed.

"My powers are strong, but not strong enough yet for that." He reflected ruefully. "Maybe when Suzaku no Miko is here… but till then I have to think another way. Going to Eiyou is not an option. Aside from having to convince Saihitei-sama… no, *Hotohori*-sama that I really am one of Kounan's chosen seven, there'd be the necessary preparations for gathering and deploying forces. And I don't even know what kind of military capacity exists. From the way the Emperor sounded… I'd guess it's not much. Which leaves… me. Somehow."

He frowned, leaning up against a tree as he gazed back on the camp. The soldiers were as yet divided, he knew that — many of them new recruits mixed in with old hands who had seen enough battles to no longer even blink at the sight of blood. The blond haired Shougun had made no appearance, and though Hou Jun had kept his senses primed on the off-chance that he might appear, so far he had detected no sign. This probably meant that the mission was not a major one — that it was, in fact, intended to blood the newcomers and give Kounan a warning of the things to come. But even so, Hou Jun knew that it would cost people their lives. And yet he still hesitated.

"I can't kill Kutou's men any more than I can let them kill Kounan's." He murmured. "That's just not how I work. Taiitsukun, you didn't train me to end life. I'm sure you'd want me to find another way to use this magic of mine. And if I can't transport Kounan's men to Kutou, I can't transport Kutou's men away from this place, either. It would take too much of my strength and I don't know what might

happen. Two hundred plus armed men is a lot, after all."

He frowned, ruminating on his options. As yet, the camp was still quiet, though he knew that within a short time the men would be dragged from their sleep and prepared for their day's advances. They would kit out their horses or gather up their weapons…

At this juncture, Hou Jun's eyes widened and he clasped his hands together as he realised he options at his disposal.

"I can't transfer that many people." He murmured. "But what about… their weaponry? If I did that… then surely they'd not be able to attack the village? And I'd have time to send a message to Eiyou about the danger. Surely that's the answer… after all, these people are suspicious enough to blame such a thing on a *kitsune*'s spirit playing tricks on them."

He pushed back the flap of the tent inside which the common footsoldiers slept, some of them stirring in the dim light of the morning sun. As the rays touched the glinting silver of swords and scabbards, Hou Jun pressed his hands together, murmuring a spell under his breath as he spread his chi across the whole of the sleeping area, mentally removing each and every weapon from its secure place. Then, once sure he had a firm psychic hold on each of them, he closed his eyes, willing the swords into the vacuum of his spell. His aura flickered faintly with vermillion light as Suzaku's magic swelled inside of him and he felt the hot, pulsing thread of power wind through his body as, little by little, the incantation began to work.

"I'll send them to the bottom of the river." He decided inwardly, as he finished his soft chant. "To the Shouryuu river, where they can never hurt anyone again. That seems a suitable place for the arms of Seiryuu, considering it's Rising Dragon River."

Slowly he parted his hands, turning to eye his handiwork with approval and relief.

"That's the ordinary soldiers down." He reflected. "Now for the officers. That'll be more tricky — I'll have to be more circumspect."

He stepped out of the tent and back into the sunlight, pausing as he observed the Captain who had addressed him the previous day. He had clearly been taking advantage of the woodland facilities, though he seemed awake and alert despite the early hour, and Hou Jun darted behind the footsoldiers' tent, murmuring a curse as he realised it would be a lot more difficult to spirit the Captain's weapons and the spare arsenal into the Shouryuu in the same way.

“Which means I have to move to plan B.” He muttered. “And dammit, I can’t hold this transformation any longer. It’s been almost eighteen hours since I arrived here — that’s longer than I’ve ever held a transformation before, and that spell in there didn’t help. I need to know my limitations as well as my strengths, it seems. On my own there’s only so much I can do… and Shuusei is right. I can’t get myself killed when Suzaku and Kounan may still have a use for me.”

Inwardly he made a decision, willing his body up into the branches of an overhanging tree as he concealed himself among the heavy foliage. As he did so, he relaxed his transformation, sitting back against the trunk and letting out his breath in a rush.

“This is tiring work.” He realised. “No wonder Taiitsukun put me through so many paces. At this rate I could use a refresher course. But still, I don’t have time to mess around. And if I can’t spirit away the rest of the weaponry, then I’ll have to think of something else.”

He frowned, inching along the branch as he peered down on the camp below. The Captain had not yet returned to his tent, pausing to bellow an order to one of the new recruits who had been sent scampering into the forest. Hou Jun knew that, if he was going to do anything, it would have to be now.

“Suzaku only knows what’ll happen if I try this.” He reflected ruefully, bringing his fingers up before his face as he closed his eyes, focusing his magic across the landscape until it surrounded the Captain’s tent and the arms tent that stood alongside it in a red haze that only he could see. Then, uttering a silent prayer to the Phoenix to give him strength, he forced as much energy as he could through the barrier he had created, tensing his body as he prepared for the commotion he knew was about to unfold.

He was not disappointed. As if hit by a giant bolt of lightning, the Captain’s tent exploded in a blaze of red and gold light, sparks flying in all directions as, a split-second later the munitions tent followed suit, scorched scraps of fabric and ash raining down on the ground like confetti. In the pen nearby, the horses began to rear and kick at the fencing, whinnying and pawing the ground in fright as they struggled to flee the ensuing chaos that had suddenly hit the camp. En masse, the soldiers sleeping in the other tent swarmed out onto the grass, jaws dropping in horror and disbelief as they stared at the devastation. Several of them clasped hands together as if praying foir divine assistance, Hou Jun noticed, and a faint, ironic smile touched his lips.

“Be careful what you wish for, you know.” He murmured, realising

as he did so that he was beginning to enjoy himself. “One more trick for luck, I think… then I’ll withdraw. I never realised blowing something up could be so satisfying. I guess if it’s in the pursuit of peace it’s all right to be a vandal once in a while.”

He stretched his fingers once more, his eyes on the horse’s pen as he flexed his hand, sending invisible shreds of chi out into the ether towards the ties that still held the beasts tight. As, one by one the tethers loosed themselves, the horses let out fierce scream-like neighs, bolting for the safety of the woodland as all around them the wood fencing that had kept them secure fell into pieces on the ground.

“It’s a ghost!”

“A demon!”

“Something evil is among us!”

As Hou Jun dropped back down low in the branches, taking a deep breath to calm his pounding heart, he heard the voices of the soldiers and as he watched, he could make out Kin and Gou in the mass of confused men, each trying to work out whether to fight or flee. It was at that point that they seemed to discover their missing blades, for a second huge clamour went up all at once as, as one man they converged on their Captain, each trying to explain what had happened.

Despite himself, Hou Jun chuckled.

“I may find being one of Suzaku’s people is fun.” He reflected. “Chaos like this means that they won’t be able to mount an attack for a while… long enough for me to get a message back to the capital. At the moment I’m operating in the shadows, but even so I know that Sai… *Hotohori*-sama is an Emperor who’ll take things seriously. Even if it’s just a rumour, he’ll know what it is he can do. Step up border patrols — whatever. I’ve done as much as I can do for now.”

As he prepared to leave the camp, however, something twitched against his senses and he paused, frowning as he tried to define the source of the sensation.

As he did so, his gaze caught sight of one young soldier standing to the side of his milling companions, a thoughtful look on his face as he stared out across the land towards the elderly tree. Despite himself, Hou Jun’s heart skipped a beat. From that distance it was not possible to see the boy’s face, however even though Hou Jun could not make out the youngster’s expression he knew, somehow, that the young soldier was looking his way.

Almost as if…

Hou Jun frowned.

"Can he *see* me?" He wondered inwardly. "Or at least… can he feel that I'm here? I've not detected anything like that before… but…"

"Bu Shunkaku!"

At that moment, someone called a name, and the flickering, tentative probe of chi faded as the boy turned his attention back towards his Captain. The strange sensation dissipated, yet despite himself Hou Jun still felt chilled to the bone.

"What in Suzaku's name was that?" He wondered. "Was it… one of *Seiryuu's* people?"

He frowned, standing up as he tried to get a fix on the strange young man again, but try as he might he couldn't detect any sign of the boy's aura in the chaotic crowd of panicked chi that was the Kutou army. Whoever he was… whatever he was… he had gone.

"But he wasn't like the others." Hou Jun ruminated. "Even though I didn't see his face, I felt it in his chi. He's one we'll one day meet again… somehow I know that for sure."

He frowned.

"And if he knows about me, he might well report it back." He added. "Which means that I should leave this place before I'm seen. There must be somewhere peaceful nearby where a travelling monk can sleep off the weariness of his long journey, after all… and I think it's time I found it!"

So, he was back.

With a heavy sigh, Ruiren let the drape fall back against the window of the south parlour, her heart heavy. Even from the inside of the house she could hear Gin's commanding tones shouting instructions at one of the unfortunate household slaves, and Ruiren knew from long experience that few of Gin's orders came without the spilling of blood in one way or another. It had sickened her from the start, and so she had done her best to shut it out. Yet, even as she turned away from the window, guilt flickered in her heart. Just because she didn't see Gin beat the slaves didn't mean that they weren't being beaten, and she berated herself on her cowardice.

Her mind flitted back to the coming of the Shougun, and despite

herself she sighed again, sinking down into an empty seat as she remembered his vivid blue eyes and the thick fair hair that fell over his shoulders. A Hin, then, just as she had heard. And yet, although she had encountered Hin in bonds at the slave markets Gin had forced her to accompany him to, she had not seen one like this one before.

"Nakago-shougun is different." She murmured. "Maybe it's because he has Seiryuu beating through his body. He doesn't seem as broken down as the others — he seems somehow strong. Strong in a way that I never knew a slave could be. I can't imagine that that bully Emperor has done any good by him to make him so, so it must be something born into him. I wish I knew what it was… I wish I had half the amount of conviction he had when he spoke to me."

She glanced at her hands.

"As it is, I'm weak and useless to even the people under my own roof." She reflected sadly. "All I can do is suffer Gin's beatings and displeasure by failing to conceive him a son and heir. If he knew that I had been secretly taking herbs to prevent such a conception, he'd probably kill me… or worse, launch his men on an attack south. But I won't… I *won't* spawn a baby for that man, if it's the only way I can stop the Kaiga line from poisoning any more lives. And besides… what kind of a mother would I be anyway? As weak and pitiful as I am — what kind of influence could I be for a child? Better this way. Better I don't let it happen at all."

"Ruiren!"

Gin's voice startled her at that moment and she glanced up, fear then resignation flickering across her features as she got slowly to her feet, bowing her head before her husband as she welcomed him home.

"You had a safe ride home, my Lord?" She asked softly, and Gin's dark eyes narrowed as he nodded his head.

"As much as ever." He responded. "The horse came lame as we got back to the gate, however — so I've punished the slaves in charge of his shoeing. It will be a nuisance indeed when so many retainers join the Emperor's forces… relying on these stupid, beastlike creatures as much as we will be."

"Punished…?" Ruiren asked hesitantly, noticing as she did so that there was blood splattered across her husband's gloves, and Gin shrugged, removing them and dropping them down onto an empty seat.

"In the only way they understand." He said frankly. "Don't look like

that, Ruiren. He isn't dead. I wouldn't waste the asset… I can't afford to have dead slaves when I need living ones. He'll just learn to be quicker to his duties the next time — and so much to the better."

Ruiren swallowed hard, feeling physically sick at her husband's casual appraisal, and Gin eyed her keenly.

"What ails you now, woman?" He asked, a faint edge to his tone, and Ruiren shook her head hurriedly, holding up her hands.

"Nothing, my Lord." She said quickly. "I'm sure it is… as you say."

"The Emperor asked after you again, today." Gin continued, moving towards her, and Ruiren's heart froze in her chest as she saw the glitter in his dark eyes. "He asked me whether or not you were with child yet, and I had to tell him not. He suggested that perhaps his physician be called to you, to see what it is that confounds us. After all, I married a young wife in order to birth an heir. Your brother and I cast the agreement in both our favours — if I had known you were of weak or sterile blood, I may have thought twice."

"I… I'm sure it isn't that, my Lord." Ruiren said faintly. "Perhaps the stars… are just not… aligned correctly. They say, you know, that luck in childbearing is… in the stars."

"Stars, huh." Gin was close enough now for her to feel his breath on her cheek, and he lifted a fat, calloused finger to brush her hair out of her face. "Well, whatever the reason, I'll grant that you're as pretty a companion as you were seven years or so ago when you first came to my manor. And you fight less… now. You've learnt a lot from being in Kaiga society… all that remains is for you to do your final duty by your husband and provide him with an heir. This is the mingling of your family's blood and mine, after all — your brother would want you to succeed just as much as I."

"I… I am sorry, my Lord." Ruiren lowered her gaze. "It seems I am weak and feeble in all respects and not worthy of your attention. But I will try harder. I will make an offering to Seiryuu this evening to ask him to bless us with a child soon."

"Do so." Gin pushed closer, his substantial belly forcing his fragile wife up against the parlour wall. Roughly he kissed her, and Ruiren felt his grip on her hair tighten as she struggled against the urge to fight him off. Although her husband was not a handsome man, widely built and aged from too much fine living, it wasn't Gin's appearance that repulsed her so much as his overbearing, cruel personality. Yet when he was like this, she did not know how to counter him. His will was so strong, she reflected bitterly. And her own was so weak.

At length he pulled away from her, eying her with a thoughtful, calculating look on his face.

“After you have said your prayers, Ruiren, you will come to my chambers tonight.” He said softly. “You understand? We will see whether the blessing of the Dragon can rectify your seven years of childlessness by granting our wishes.”

“Yes, my Lord.” Ruiren murmured, her heart skipping a beat as she interpreted his meaning. “I understand.”

“Good.” Gin stood back, an approving expression touching his dark eyes. “Then I will have little to find fault with when I send word to your brother.”

“To my… brother?” Despite herself Ruiren looked startled. “I don’t understand… why would my Lord need to communicate with the South? Is this the Emperor’s will? Surely Aniue cannot do anything more to benefit you than he already has.”

“Do not talk back to me, woman.” Gin said sharply, his hand coming down hard across her cheek and despite herself Ruiren flinched, feeling the edge of his family signet ring scrape across her skin as he glared at her. “I will not tolerate it, you should know that by now.”

“I… I am sorry.” Ruiren whispered. “I only meant… that he is not powerful as you are. His resources are not the Kaiga’s, after all, and he has not the same favour with the Emperor.”

“True, but he can still serve his purpose, else I would never have entered into making him family.” Gin said frankly. “You were an attractive girl at sixteen and you still are, but lust alone does not drive the actions of the noble classes. No. This is an opportunity to make further use of that connection. I require his help in another regard — and so does Shoukitei-sama. After all, there are still tribal settlements in the Southern province which remain untouched.”

Despite herself, Ruiren’s eyes opened wide with alarm as she realised what he meant.

“You… want my brother… to launch attacks on these settlements, my Lord?” She asked softly, and Gin nodded.

“For… for what purpose?”

“If you were not a woman, I would expect a better sense of political awareness.” Gin said crisply. “But I suppose, given your sheltered life so far that it can’t be helped. What other reason, Ruiren? For slaves, of

course. The market demand will be higher with war on the horizon. Men of Kutou blood will fight in the Emperor's name. Others must take their place to help keep the economy thriving. What other option do you see? These people are still a blight on our landscape, taking resources and land from the native folk who were born into this country legitimately. They are as much the enemy as those who live over the Southern border… and as such, it is time they too were put in their proper place."

"Gin-sama…" Ruiren bit her lip, horror flooding through her. "But… if you left them alone… surely…"

"Why would we waste such a valuable source of free labour?" Gin stared at her as if she was mad. "Don't be foolish. You know nothing about the running of a busy estate. You shouldn't venture an opinion on something which you don't understand — your duty is to provide me with entertainment and an heir. Nothing more and nothing less."

At that moment there was a knock on the door of the parlour, and Ruiren recognised the simple, three beat knock that marked the presence of a slave. Gin, his attention momentarily distracted, muttered a curse of impatience under his breath as he glared in the direction of the door.

"Enter!" He exclaimed, and the door swung back to reveal a young man of approximately sixteen or seventeen, his silver hair bound back from his face in a knot at the base of his neck. He entered the room slowly, dropping before his master in a position of suitable humility as he held out his burden — a message, Ruiren decided, and from the looks, one relating to her husband's recent military agreements. Once more she was reminded of the dashing Hin Shougun, and absently she wondered what kind of an army he would make Gin's men into.

"This is all you bring me, slave?" Gin's temper was clearly aroused as he took the boxed scroll from the slave's grip. "When I am alone with my wife, yet you seek to intrude with a simple message bearing only the seal of the Imperial Guard? Have you learnt nothing since you were brought here — do you not know that only a missive from the Emperor himself is worthy of interrupting such precious time between a man and his spouse?"

Ruiren's gaze flitted to the slave, who raised his gaze to his master's, an impassive, clouded expression in his beautiful amethyst eyes. Though there were many slaves at the Kaiga estate, this was one of the few that Ruiren knew by sight, as he had arrived with a group of straggly companions the same month as she had first become Gin's bride. During those first days she had seen the youngsters horribly

beaten and pushed about, stripped of their names and their tribal identities until till only three of them had remained alive. As the survivors had been pressed into service, and feeling that her slavehood had begun at the same time as theirs, Ruiren had silently named each of them. This, of the three, was the youngest — and so she had called him '*Kokizu*', or "Little Scar." Of the slaves who had arrived those years earlier, she knew only too well that one had tried to break bonds and escape, to be brought back in chains and tortured to death in front of the other slave men and women as a warning. The second, a young girl, had lost her wits after a harrowing session with Housei, the slave-master, and as a result had been put to death, her body burned and the ashes tossed into the river that ran nearby.

Yet Kokizu remained. As Ruiren gazed at him, she saw a faint flicker of something she had also seen in Nakago's eyes — a determined resolution to keep going, no matter what was thrown his way. And though she had never seen the slave cry, her heart often ached for him and the family and friends he must have been dragged away from.

Now Gin wanted to torch more villages, slaughter more people and take away more freedom. As she gazed at Kokizu, her heart lurched in her chest. She was as trapped as he was, she knew that. As helpless to prevent it as the slave whose wrists revealed the marks of nightly shackles and whose back bore many weals from the lash of Housei's cruel whip. In that instant she hated herself more than she had ever done before, for she knew that in order to maintain her continued safety and position, her brother would cave very quickly to Gin's demands.

And then, more tribal people of Kutou would lose their right to live free.

"Well?" Gin had not noticed his wife's sudden pallor, his attention fixed on the unfortunate tribesman. "Answer me, you fool. Why do you not have an inch of sense in that thick skull of yours? Is it too much to ask you people to do as you're told and nothing else?"

Kokizu did not respond, his expression as impassive as ever, and Gin's eyes narrowed to slits as he brought the scroll box down hard across the side of the young slave's face, knocking him to the ground as he tossed the message aside.

"Gin-sama!" Despite herself, Ruiren could not keep quiet, and Gin wheeled on her, his look enough to send her cowering back against the wall.

“Do *not* interfere in my matters of discipline!” He thundered. “This creature is Meihi. His people are obstinate, arrogant and un-obliging. They are also singularly stupid and they only understand what is beaten into them.”

“But…” Ruiren murmured, and Gin’s eyes narrowed once more.

“If you wish to join him beneath Housei’s whip, Ruiren, then continue in this vein.” He said darkly. “You know I do not jest. I will not have my wife contradict me, and not before refuse such as this.”

He lifted a heavy boot, kicking at the unfortunate Kokizu, before stamping his foot down on the boy’s right hand with some force. Ruiren’s heart caught in her chest as she registered the slave’s wince of pain, but somehow he did not cry out, merely bowing his head.

“My sincere apologies, Master.” He said softly, his tones edged with the strange, exotic accent of the Meihi people. “I remember next I come.”

“See that you do.” Gin moved his foot, bending down to glare at the unfortunate slave. “If I was not so short of bodies to work the land I would have you sorely beaten till you were within an inch of your life. Take it as a mercy I do not give Housei that order — stupid as you are, you can’t be oblivious to what that means.”

The slave did not respond, but Ruiren saw a flicker of something in his eyes which may have been apprehension, and Gin nodded.

“And if you must taint our language with your tribal tongue, at least try and speak it correctly.” He added. “I will not tolerate broken Chinese among my workers.”

He bent, retrieving the discarded message box.

“I will be in my study, Ruiren.” He said, glancing at his wife as he dusted it off. “I have papers to sign and things to get ready. Remember to make that offering to Seiryuu, my dear — I look forward to this evening with anticipation.”

With that he was gone, the door swinging shut behind him, and for a moment there was silence. Then, slowly, the slave began to pick himself up from the floor. Even from across the room, Ruiren could see that at least two of his fingers were broken from Gin’s pressure, and she bit her lip, tears glittering in her eyes as she hurried forward to help him to his feet. As she did so, he stared at her in surprise, and Ruiren felt the tears begin to spill down her cheeks.

“I’m sorry, Kokizu. I’m so sorry.” She murmured, and the slave

paused for a moment, as if digesting her words. Then he bowed his head towards her, and without another word, followed his master from the parlour.

Ruiren was left alone, and she sank down in one of the chairs, burying her head in her hands as her tears continued to fall.

"How can I let Gin force my brother's hand… how can I be the cause of so many more people suffering?" She wondered bitterly. "But… how can I *stop* it? To fight Gin would be to bring shame on my brother and pressure neither of us can stand up to. Gin has the Emperor's ear, and… and he is a frightening man when he is angry. So long as I am in his power, Aniue will not refuse anything Gin asks. Why do I have to be so useless? How can I be a Lady of Kutou with all this wealth and jewellery and yet still be so trapped? So many people have already suffered — why do I have to stand back and let it happen to more?"

The house was quiet, somehow, without Shun'u.

Aidou rested her hands on the sill, gazing out towards the old barn as she remembered the conversation the previous night. Despite her frustration and annoyance at her brother's decision, she also knew that he had stained his hands with blood on account of his family's safety, and she sighed, leaning up against the wall as she contemplated how deeply this sense of loyalty had permeated his thick skull.

Now he was gone, she knew, things would likely settle back down to normal. Rin'an's wedding preparations could continue in readiness for her fiancé's return from trading in Kahou, and if the shadowy man's partner had business with Suzaku's people, he would probably not return to the farm.

"But he may follow Shun'u, and that idiot will throw himself into danger on the least excuse." She murmured, clenching her fists as she thought it over. "He's seventeen, no more than that. A kid still, really. And daft enough to get himself killed regardless of whether he acknowledges his stellar mark or he doesn't. After how hard we've all worked to keep him safe… but even despite that, he's gone again. Is it something in his spirit that we can't contain? No matter how hard we try to quell it — is Tasuki's blood really that strong inside of him?"

She closed her eyes, resting her head against the uneven cut of the wood as memories flooded unbidden through her senses.

She could hear her mother crying.

Cautiously the young girl crept along the hallway of the ramshackle old farm-house, biting her lip as all kinds of frightening scenarios rushed through her mind. Had someone been hurt? Was someone ill? Had animals broken into the farm grounds and dug up the crops again?

Whatever it was, it had upset her mother, and Aidou didn't like it.

As she reached the chamber from where the noise was coming, she hesitated, her eyes opening wide as she realised that it was her brother's bedchamber. Fear struck through her heart. Had something happened, then, to Shun'u? The little brother she knew her mother and father both so prized — the one who, of all the family, seemed the most vibrant and full of life?

For a moment, Aidou just stood there, pressed up against the door as she wondered what she should do. She was old enough to know that death and disease haunted families in villages like theirs. Only the fortnight before, their close neighbours had lost their six year old son in an accident down their old well, and she had seen his pale, broken body as it had been hoisted to the surface, somehow more like a doll than any semblance of real life.

She shivered at the memory.

That was not going to happen to her brother! No matter what, she would ***not*** *let Shun'u get hurt in that way!*

Gathering her resolve, she pushed her small hands against the door, stepping into the chamber as she approached her mother's huddled figure. Even in the dim light she could see her brother fast asleep in his bed, the soft sound of his breathing just audible between her mother's sobs.

"Okaasan?" She murmured, and the farmer's wife glanced up, registering her eldest daughter's presence for the first time. For a moment, the two just gazed at one another. Then, silently, the substantially built woman held out her hands and Aidou hurried towards her, allowing her mother to embrace her.

"Aidou-chan." She murmured. "Did you come here because of me?"

"I heard you crying." Aidou nodded, her red tail of hair bobbing as she did so. "Is something wrong with Shun'u, Okaasan? Is he… sick?"

"Sick?" Her mother hesitated for a moment. Then she shook her head. "No… no, Ai-chan. He's not sick. Nothing is the matter with him. He's fine."

"Then why… are you so upset?" Aidou asked anxiously. "What's wrong?"

Her companion did not answer for a moment. Instead she reached down to brush her fingers against the sleeping boy's cheek, and he stirred slightly, murmuring incoherently in his sleep. His thick hair, the same rusty red colour as his elder sister's spiked out from his head in all directions, and there was a look of contentment on his face, as if nothing could possibly be better in his life.

"Okaasan?" Aidou murmured, and the farmer's wife glanced up. She bit her lip, shifting her fingers from Shun'u's cheek to the sleeve of his nightshirt, pushing back the heavy folds of worn fabric to reveal his right arm. Faintly, in the dim glow of the candle lamp, Aidou could make out something on her brother's arm, and she frowned, peering closer. As she did so, she gasped, opening her eyes wide with surprise as she stared at her mother, bemused.

"He has something written on his arm?" She whispered, only just remembering to keep her voice down. "But why? What is it, Okaasan? What does it say?"

"It's the character 'tsubasa'." Her mother said sadly. "The wings, Aidou. The wings of the Phoenix who guards us all and keeps us safe from harm."

*"**Suzaku**'s wings?" Aidou was growing more confused by the second. "What do you mean?"*

The heavyset woman closed her eyes, as more tears threatened.

"There is a legend." She murmured unevenly, "That when Kounan is in peril, a Priestess will come from another world to gather the seven stars of the southern sky and summon Suzaku to bring peace to our people. Have you ever heard that story?"

"I think so." Aidou nodded. "But what does it mean? That someone is going to come and… go into the sky?"

"The seven stars in the legend are not stars at all, but people, Aidou." The woman shook her head. "People… born with a special mark. A red mark."

Aidou's hand flew to her mouth, and her mother nodded.

"Like Shun'u." She murmured. "Like my son."

"But… Suzaku is special, isn't he?" Aidou reflected. "And he protects us, doesn't he, Okaasan? Doesn't it mean that he's protecting Shun'u, if he has that on his arm?"

"Shun'u is one of his Chosen. My boy… one of his Celestial Warriors." Her companion reached up to brush away the tears that had once more begun to fall. "The seven warriors are destined to fight in Suzaku's name to

protect his Priestess, Aidou. And to… to die for the sake of Kounan's peace. Shun'u… Shun'u… is Suzaku's sacrifice. He's… he's given us a son at last only to… to take him from us when he's grown!"

"Take him from…" Aidou trailed off, horror flaring in her eyes and she shook her head. "No! No, Okaasan! I won't let him! I won't let it happen! Shun'u belongs here, with us! Suzaku can't take him away. He ***can't!"***
Aidou-chan?"

A voice startled the young woman back to the present, and she turned, meeting her mother's equally clouded eyes with troubled bronze one of her own. Without a word being spoken, both knew what the other was thinking, and as the farmer's wife heaved her substantial frame towards her eldest child, Aidou found she had to resist the urge to behave like the nine year old child, fear for her brother's safety still dancing in her heart.

"We failed, didn't we?" She murmured. "And now that stupid idiot is out there on his own doing God knows what. People are hunting him, and… how he was talking…"

She trailed off, and her companion sank down into an empty seat, shaking her head.

"He's changing." She said helplessly. "The Shun'u who ran away from the farm two years ago would never have known how to kill someone, even in a situation like that. Not that I ain't glad for Rin'an's safety, but that he'd have that much fire inside of him…"

She spread her hands.

"We've tried our best to fight it for him, but I suppose you can't fight Suzaku." She added helplessly.

Aidou turned her gaze back to the farmland outside, fighting against the tears that blurred her sight and threatened to spill down her cheeks.

"He's always been such an idiot." She muttered. "Thick-headed, thick-skinned… he has no idea how much he's worryin' you — or the rest of us — by actin' up like this. Runnin' off to the mountain, an' now to God knows where huntin' cures… those people came to the village because of him, an' if the stories about the oni-shounen are true, it won't be long till the Emperor sends people, too. We can't stop this, can we? We've tried to beat at least a little self-preservation into him, but it's like… he wants to put himself on the end of someone's blade. An' now…"

She trailed off, and her mother sighed.

“Shun’u is Shun’u.” She said heavily. “Suzaku chose him for whatever reason, an’ I won’t accept that that means he’ll take our boy from us. But… I know the legend, just as you do. Better than even he does, t’be truthful. Reckless or not, there’s nothing we can do about it now. He’s restless an’ impatient. Somethin’ is stirrin’ in Kounan, an’ all of this is proof.”

Her expression softened.

“Aidou-chan, you shouldn’t spend so much time worrying about things which are my job to worry about.” She added quietly, and Aidou swung around, eying her mother in surprise.

“Okaasan?”

“You’ve always done it, as the eldest. You’ve always paid attention to the others an’ made sure that nothin’ happens to them that shouldn’t. Shun’u especially, even if he never appreciates it.” Her companion responded evenly. “But you know, you don’t have to do that always. Rin’an will soon be married, an’ then it will just be Manka whose situation has to be settled. Manka… and you.”

“And Shun’u.” Aidou muttered, but her mother shook her head.

“Leave the boy to me.” She said frankly. “Let me lose sleep over his safety — it’s not fair for it to fall on you, my girl. Besides, a certain person has been payin’ you a certain amount of attention of late. Surely you ain’t going to ignore that to chase after your brother’s stupid whims? Of all my kids I thought you at least were possessed of some common sense… or are you so opposed to the idea of settlin’ for yourself?”

Despite herself, Aidou pinkened, and her mother smiled.

“Ah, I thought so.” She murmured. “Were you not going to mention it to your father and I at all, Aidou-chan? Shame on you.”

“It’s not so simple.” Aidou admitted. “Yes, he has… recently, I have had… court paid to me. But… he’s as foolish a man as Shun’u in some ways, Okaasan. Since Saihitei-sama’s proclamation was read in Souun he’s been all gung-ho about signin’ up an’ fightin’ for blood and glory in this war that hasn’t even happened yet.”

She spread her hands.

“Men are stupid an’ they have to fight over everything.” She added sadly. “But I can’t talk him out o’ goin’. He says he’s goin’ to prove himself worthy of me, an’ come back a hero for Kounan. He an’ his buddies are all signin’ up to go to Eiyou an’ become part of the

Emperor's army. Never mind us girls left behind… so long as they do what they want to, we don't matter."

"Men are odd things." Her mother reflected. "Thank Suzaku your father was never that kind of a hot-head. But listen, Aidou-chan. As you said, there isn't a war yet. Like as not he'll go, find that out an' then be sent back home soon enough. Don't let go too quickly, all right? Despite this, he's a good man an' he'd take care of you. An' you shouldn't have to spend all your time worryin' about us."

"If Shun'u'd recognise his responsibilities, he could do that." Aidou said bitterly. "But as it is, I'm the eldest. So whatever you say, Okaasan, I can't help it."

"You're a good girl, Ai-chan." Her mother smiled, and fleetingly Aidou was reminded once again of that conversation from long ago. "But don't let your brother's impulsiveness ruin your happiness. All right? Suzaku only knows what's coming — but whatever is, Shun'u is out of our hands now. So long as he ain't on the farm… there's nothin' we can do about him. You know that as well as I do, so don't destroy your future over his shortcomin's. Men will be men, in the end, an' there ain't nothing to be done about it."

Aidou closed her eyes briefly, recognising the truth in her mother's words. Slowly she nodded.

"I know." She whispered. "But I can't accept it. I don't want Suzaku to take my brother, Okaasan. No matter how much of a blockhead he is, I don't want it! I wish Suzaku's spell had fallen on someone else… Shun'u is ours and *it isn't fair!"*

Chapter 12

Chapter Eleven

Well, at last he could take a rest.

Hou Jun sank down against the trunk of an aging willow tree, stretching his arms over his head as he stifled a weary yawn. Since his exploits in the military encampment he had not let himself drop his guard, and had infiltrated the nearby border city once more in disguise in search of writing materials with which to fashion his memo to the Emperor. For a while he had troubled over how to word the missive, debating whether or not to sign it with his name or to leave it as a tip from a well-meaning stranger. At length, however, he had finished it with the two characters that made up the word 'Suzaku', hoping against hope that the intelligent young Emperor would realise it was from a friend.

Knowing that his still developing Suzaku power was still recovering from his morning exertions, he had decided not to risk taking the letter there in person, for he knew that he did not have enough energy to create an accurate landing point and disguise himself once more as an Imperial messenger. Instead he had cast a more minor spell over his *kasa*, sending the message into it with a fervent prayer for its safe arrival into Hotohori's hands. That done, he had relaxed, and, for the first time, allowed sleepiness to overcome him.

Even though parts of Kutou were wracked by war, after all, the area where he had now sought sanctuary was open and green, and despite himself Hou Jun slipped into a tired doze, his worries eased by the sending of his letter.

After all, he reflected drowsily, it was no longer just down to him to stop the antics of Kutou's military against the South.

With that he sank into oblivion, as past memories began to twitch and tease at his senses.

"You know, you'll never make any kind of official if you write so illegibly."

Hou Jun glanced up from the columns of fastidiously neat kanji he had been writing, a smile touching his lips as he recognised the speaker. He got to his feet, setting his brush down on the desk as he hurried to fling his arms around the newcomer.

“Hikou!” He exclaimed. “When did you get back? I thought you were staying with relatives till the worst of the harvest was brought in — how are you back here so soon?”

“We’ve finished more quickly and Mother was concerned that I was neglecting my time here.” Hikou’s eyes danced with amusement as he held his friend at arm’s length. “She seems to think that you need me to keep an eye on you too, Hou Jun… so I couldn’t argue with her logic. Aren’t you happy to see me?”

“You know I am.” Hou Jun scolded. “It’s unexpected but not unpleasant. Does Father know you’re back?”

“Not yet.” Hikou looked rueful. “Before I left he gave me an assignment — something I should think about carefully and figure out before I returned. The truth is I still haven’t put all the pieces of it together — so I hoped you might help me get my head around it first.”

“I should have known.” Hou Jun laughed. “You want to pick my brains, not spend time with me.”

“Yes, something like that.” Hikou agreed merrily. “Well? Will you take a break from your studies and come share ale with me in the local tavern? We’ve not seen each other in three weeks, after all.”

“True enough.” Hou Jun agreed. “All right. I won’t complain. I was about done with my writing in any case.”

He grinned.

“As for Father, he’s entertaining envoys from the capital, so he won’t be interested in you for a while.” He added playfully. “You timed your return well, my friend. I’ve already finished writing up the notes he gave me to do since he was swamped with other things… you escaped that as well.”

“I was smart, then.” Hikou looked amused. “But if that’s the case, it’s good for you, isn’t it? Surely if Ri-san is taking you into his work more and more, it means he sees you as ready to take that step.”

“I suppose so.” Hou Jun admitted.

As they crossed the square towards the local tavern, Hikou glanced around him.

“I haven’t seen Kouran since I got back.” He observed. “She’s usually not far from this neck of the woods — is something wrong?”

“No… her mother was unwell, that’s all, but she’s recovering quickly.” Hou Jun assured him. “Father made sure that Kouran had the right herbs to give her, since he has a friend in Souen who’s an apothecary.”

“I see. So Kouran’s been able to nurse her.” Hikou became thoughtful, and Hou Jun nodded, a smile touching his lips.

“Just like Kouran.” He agreed, pushing open the door of the tavern. “Well? What’s this puzzle my father set you?”

“It wasn’t a puzzle so much as a riddle, I think.” Hikou sighed, sinking down against the bar as he did so. “At least, it seems like a riddle to me. He said that if a town is poor, the villages around it tend to become poorer. And more, if the town is in danger of attack, the villages are in yet more danger. Yet if the town becomes richer and stronger, why doesn’t it mean the villages automatically become richer and stronger as well?”

“I see.” Hou Jun’s clever gaze became thoughtful. “He really wanted you to think deep, didn’t he?”

“He said it was something that I’d need to properly consider if I really wanted to be an official and work alongside you and people like your family.” Hikou agreed. “And he said that I should be able to understand it easily, since I knew village life better than anyone. But even though that’s true, I’m still having trouble piecing it all together. If a town is poor, then I can understand that trade in that town is poor and the villagers suffer because they can’t take their produce to market and hope for a good sale. That’s just common sense, right? In all areas of Kounan that’s the case — that the local towns provide a hub for all the villages nearby to share and profit from their wares. Right?”

“Yes.” Hou Jun agreed. “I think so.”

“And if the town was to be attacked, well it would stand to reason that the villages would also be threatened.” Hikou continued, as the tavern keeper placed two mugs of ale down before them, accepting Hou Jun’s coin with a rough grin. “The guardsmen have their barracks within the town, after all. If something happened to them there’d be no way of preventing an assaulting army from invading and pillaging the villages. The people wouldn’t have a chance to defend themselves against an organised military assault. Agreed?”

“Agreed.” Hou Jun nodded, taking a sip of his drink. “So far you make sense. So what’s the problem?”

“The last part.” Hikou sighed. “Logically you’d think that if the town’s weakness was the village’s weakness, then surely the town’s strength is the village’s strength too? If the town is richer, trade is obviously better. The village traders can make a better profit at market and everyone benefits, right?”

Hou Jun was silent for a moment, considering this carefully. Then, at

length, he shook his head.

"I think what Father was getting at is that if a town is too rich, it can forget its other obligations, you know?" He said thoughtfully. "That it's all very well a town being prosperous, but if it's prosperous at the expense of the local villages…"

"Hrm." Hikou's eyes narrowed as he contemplated. "You mean that because people in the towns are so focused on their own wealth, they forget about their obligations to the villages nearby?"

"I think so." Hou Jun nodded. "Father's always said that part of his job as a city official is to protect not just the rights of the city people but the villages around the outside, too. That's why he's always insisted on us living in a village, not in the city itself. He doesn't want to ever forget that there's more to his job than just governing Souen. I think that's what he wanted you to think about, Hikou-kun. That even if Souen became the richest city on the planet and gained special Imperial favour and so on — it wouldn't mean that that wealth would automatically be passed on to the people in the villages."

He smiled.

"He's trying to teach you about official corruption." He said teasingly. "Obviously he feels you're at risk of being tainted."

"Shut up." Despite himself Hikou laughed, punching his friend playfully on the arm. "If he thought that he'd never have given me the puzzle, would he?"

"Mm, you never know. You still needed my help to figure it out." Hou Jun grinned. "But he probably won't mind that. Father believes in officials discussing things before making decisions, after all. We discussed it and came to a decision. I think he'll like that."

"Guess so." Hikou acknowledged. "If that's the case, then, I'm glad to have your brains to pick, Hou Jun."

"Living in a village does teach you a lot of things." Hou Jun looked thoughtful. "Especially about how vulnerable people here can be. I want to follow Father's example in that respect, Hikou. If and when I become a proper official, I want to protect the villagers as well as the people in the towns."

"You mean other than with your fists?" Hikou's eyes danced, and Hou Jun reddened, shaking his head.

"You know what I mean." He reproached. "I'm not that reckless, Hikou-kun."

“Perhaps not, though you’ll make an interesting kind of official, losing your temper at every sign of injustice.” Hikou reflected. “I know your heart is in the right place and so does everyone else. But I’m sure that’s why Mother thought I should be back here. After all, I keep a handle on your impulsiveness — don’t I? She says it’s high-spirited intelligence, but even so…”

“Stop teasing me.” Hou Jun objected. “I’m not going to rise to you. That might have happened a year or two ago, but I’m not going to lose my temper or launch into any random battles without good cause. I’m not a kid any more — I can control my temper.”

“I guess I’ll believe it when I see it.” Hikou’s eyes twinkled with humour. “The next time someone shoves aside an old woman selling at market, or tries to muscle their way through the village at the expense of the people who live here.”

“I’m serious.” Hou Jun defended himself. “I’m not as impetuous as I was, Hikou. I’m going to fight those things the way Father does, now. I’m eighteen, after all. I’m grown up now. Maybe soon…”

He faltered, and Hikou eyed him curiously.

“Maybe soon… what?”

“Nothing.” Hou Jun shook his head. “It’s an undecided, vague factor floating in my head at the moment, and I haven’t worked it out for myself yet. So I’m not going to embarrass myself by talking to you about it until I’m ready to. But even so, I’ve been thinking a lot more since you’ve been away about the future and what I’m going to do now. I’m the eldest, after all. I have to set a good example to my sister, so Mother says — and I want to live up to Father’s expectations of me, too. So no more reckless losses of temper, Hikou. I promise. That Hou Jun is a long way behind me now.”

“You’re going all mysterious on me.” Hikou objected, and Hou Jun grinned.

“Maybe.” He acknowledged. “Don’t worry. You’ll be the first to know, if… when I have it straight in my own mind. Till then I’m going to focus my attention on the work Father gives me and prove that I’m worth… that I’m ready to follow in his footsteps. After all, if he’s so busy, he might need the help — from both of us, for that matter.”

“But right now Kounan is peaceful, the crops are good and everyone’s fine.” Hikou pointed out, raising his glass in a mock toast. “So you shouldn’t worry so much, Hou Jun. Noone’s in any danger. Your Father’s riddle was hypothetical, that’s all. I doubt we’ll see anything like that

happen in our lifetime."

"I wonder." Hou Jun's expression became uncharacteristically sombre. "When you said that, a strange chill went down my spine. It's like you've tempted fate… I wish you hadn't said it."

"Now you're getting superstitious." Hikou snorted. "Come on. Drink up. If your Father's busy this morning, that means you and I are free, doesn't it? Let's call by Kouran's house and see how her mother is. Maybe we can help out — and I haven't seen her in a while, so it's only fair."

"All right." Hou Jun nodded. "We'll go see Kouran. After all, I know she'll be as glad to see you back as I am, Hikou."

"Surround him!"

A sudden, barked order sent the images flying back to the depths of Hou Jun's memory as, still somewhat disorientated he returned to wakefulness, fighting to regain his bearings as he opened his eyes. A stranger stared down at him, a cold glint in his dark eyes, and Hou Jun hurriedly gathered his wits as he realised that he had been dreaming and that not only was Hikou and that happy time long gone, but that he was vulnerable and alone in Kutou's territory. He struggled into a sitting position, inwardly cursing his carelessness at having judged the landscape only on its appearance, for as he became more alert he registered that he was encircled by a group of men wearing the same official uniform. None of them looked overly amused, and one of them bore in his hand a long, well-polished blade.

"Who are you?" This man, who was obviously the leader, thrust his weapon towards Hou Jun's throat, his eyes narrowing as he eyed his opponent suspiciously. "And what are you doing on this land?"

"This land?" Hou Jun stalled, struggling to get his bearings as he tried to work out whether or not the badge on the man's uniform was familiar. Were these men from the military encampment who had somehow hunted him down? Or was this a completely separate situation — had he just stumbled into something without realising it?

At his lack of forthcoming answer, the leader cast a glance at his companions who, as one man grabbed Hou Jun by the shoulders, hauling him to his feet. They gave him a shake, then dropped him to the ground, and before he could react Hou Jun felt a foot burrow into the small of his back as someone pressed him down into the mud.

The shadow of his agressors loomed over him, peering at him with accusatory, icy eyes.

"Who are you and why are you here?" The leader snapped, his

tones laced with the distinctive, harsh accent of the East. “Answer me, before I slit your throat!”

“And that’s as much as we know.”

The messenger bowed down before his Emperor, raising his gaze to meet his companion’s puzzled golden eyes.

“I wish I had more to tell you, Heika — but we just don’t know where it came from.”

“I see.” Hotohori pursed his lips. “In that case, you are dismissed.”

“Yes, sire.” The messenger bowed once more, withdrawing from the chamber, and Hotohori sighed, glancing down once more at the scroll in his hand.

For a moment there was silence, as he re-read the brief message for the third time. Then he frowned.

“*Kutou’s forces are massing on the Eastern border*.” He said softly, reading the passage aloud as he ran his index finger down the columns of neat, unfamiliarly scribed kanji. “*Kuso-ken was in imminent danger of attack, although for the time being the danger has been somewhat averted. The Shougun of the East plans to invade Kounan and is not an enemy who should be taken lightly. It is also true that Kutou’s Emperor Shoukitei-sama does not mean to negotiate terms for peace with the South. Kutou intend to launch full scale aggression against Kounan and Suzaku no Miko, and if the borders are left undefended, people will die*.”

He glanced up.

“Haku, what do you think?” He asked. “This kind of letter, sent at random from an unknown source and via an un-discernable method — what do you make of it?”

“I don’t know, Heika.” Haku frowned, his own expression as mystified as that of his superior. “In times such as these, any sign of aggression towards the Eastern border would provide Kutou with ample reason to sanction violence. If they thought that we were grouping to attack them, they could claim they acted in their own defence and that any attack they did make on the South was simply a pre-emptive strike in their own interests.”

“You mean, it could be a trap?” Hotohori questioned, and Haku shrugged.

“I truly do not know.” He admitted. “But it is possible, Heika. Yes.

In such a delicate political climate, only the slightest spark is needed to set aflame the tinder of war."

"As you say." Hotohori sighed, sinking back in his throne as he scanned the message yet again, setting it down on the desk before him as he smoothed the parchment against the wood of the table. "Haku, I want to summon the Council. But before that, I want to summon my Seishi brethren. I wish to discuss this with them, too."

"With Suzaku's people, Heika?" Haku looked surprised. "But… with all respect, Tamahome-sama is a man from the peasant class and Nuriko-sama is…"

He faltered, clearly struggling to find a tactful way to describe Nuriko's situation, and despite himself Hotohori raised a droll smile.

"Yes, I know." he said. "But even so, I'd like their counsel also. There's something about this message and I want to know if they sense it too. I can't explain what the feeling is, but to sign it thus, with the kanji for Suzaku… it makes me wonder…"

"Sire?"

"Maybe it's nothing." Hotohori shook his head. "But either way, I'd be happier to have a second and third opinion."

"As you wish, Sire." Haku spread his hands, turning to gesture to a guard to carry out the errand. The man saluted, disappearing immediately, and Haku turned his attention back to his Emperor.

"Can I ask what it is your Highness is considering?"

"This letter." Hotohori tapped the parchment with an elegant, pale finger. "It's not written in the clumsy hand of a worker who's learnt his letters through random means or in a rural village schoolhouse. The letters are well-formed and as accurate as any scribe here at my court. More, it is neatly done, to the point and with well-chosen words. Yet it is written on the simplest of parchment, which anyone might buy from any local town market. Does that not seem strange to you?"

"Heika, the message in its entirety seems strange to me." Haku admitted ruefully. "None of the messengers admit to bringing it, yet it got here all the same."

"Mm." Hotohori's eyes narrowed, glancing across at the length of ribbon which had hastily been used to tie the scroll closed for its journey. "And this, Haku? Do you recognise it?"

"It's a ribbon, Heika." Haku looked lost, and Hotohori nodded.

“Yes, it is.” He agreed absently. “And I don’t pretend I know one end of a ribbon from another. But with any luck I know someone whose opinion I can ask.”

Haku stared at his master as if the Emperor had lost his mind, but before he could find a polite way to phrase his next question, the door swung open to reveal first Tamahome and then Nuriko, long skirts trailing behind him as he followed his Seishi companion into the room. As both dropped in their customary bow before the Emperor, Hotohori raised his hand, indicating for them to dispense with the formality.

“What’s the matter, Hotohori-sama?” Nuriko looked curious. “Why do you need us all of a sudden?”

“Is it Miaka?” Tamahome added, and Hotohori’s heart clenched at the hope in his comrade’s voice. He shook his head.

“I have no news of Miaka.” He said heavily. “No, this is something else. Nuriko,”

He turned, holding out the ribbon.

“Your opinion, please… on this.”

“Ribbon, Heika?” Nuriko took the thin fabric, looking nonplussed. “Is this somehow important… I don’t understand?”

“Your family are involved in the fabric business, isn’t that correct?” Hotohori asked softly, and Nuriko nodded.

“Yes, they are, but…”

“Then you must have learnt a little about the trade yourself?”

“Some, I suppose. Why?”

“That ribbon. I want to know its source — what kind of people make and sell it, and where.”

“From just a scrap of ribbon?” Tamahome looked startled. “Hotohori-sama, what’s this about?”

“In a moment.” Hotohori shook his head. “Nuriko?”

“It’s common market ribbon, nothing out of the ordinary.” Nuriko dropped the strip back down onto the desk. “People often sell it at corner stalls and it gets used for menial purposes. It’s not exactly the kind of fabric my family deal in, Heika… I would have thought that it’s cheap enough to be found anywhere that has a market.”

“Cheap ribbon, cheap parchment…” Hotohori’s eyes narrowed.

“And you’re saying it could have come from anywhere in Kounan?”

“Mm.” Nuriko faltered, then shook his head. “I don’t think it came from Kounan, Heika. I may be way off, but I think it was dyed somewhere else. Kutou, most likely, but possibly Sairou. I’ve heard my father on the subject of dyes and the fact there are some cheap alternatives produced over the border which appear to hold fast but in reality run after a few washes. This one is already fading around the edges — I wouldn’t have thought any self-respecting Kounan dye merchant would lay claim to it. Not even one who supplied the most base local market.”

“So it’s foreign ribbon.” Hotohori nodded. “I see. Thank you. Your insight has been most revealing.”

“Hotohori-sama, did you just bring Nuriko and I here to talk about girls’ hair accessories?” Tamahome asked quizzically. “Because I have an errand or two I need to run, and it’s already getting late in the day.”

Hotohori frowned.

“This message appeared — and I do mean that literally — in the palace earlier this morning.” He said quietly, placing his hand down on the unrolled scroll before him. “It’s source is unknown, its writer also unknown. Whoever penned it has reasonable skill with a brush and some education. Yet it is written on common market parchment and fastened by a cheaply produced scrap of ribbon. The message warns of Kutou’s military movement towards the Eastern border. Haku-sama believes that it could be a trap set to lure us into making a false military move. But I… I don’t know. My instincts are somewhat confused by the clear contradiction.”

“Nuriko already said that the ribbon was foreign. So it could have come from Kutou.” Tamahome reasoned. Hotohori nodded.

“It could.” He agreed. “But even so…”

He sighed, shrugging his shoulders.

“I can’t explain it.” He admitted. “But when I touched it — when I unrolled it and saw the kanji for Suzaku I felt that… it was being sent by a friend. Not an enemy. And that it was something I should take and consider with great care before discarding. I don’t know the person who wrote this message, but whoever it was felt confident enough to reach out to me, and took whatever risk necessary to get it to me. I don’t know by what method it came here. But I intend to put it before the council and see whether or not an investigative party can

be sent towards the East."

"A hidden ally, huh?" Nuriko reached over to touch the parchment, peering at it over the Emperor's shoulder. "Suzaku. Who signs a note Suzaku? Why not with their name, if they're here to help us?"

"One of us, perhaps." Hotohori suggested, and Tamahome's eyes widened.

"A Seishi?" He demanded, and Hotohori nodded.

"It occured." He agreed. Tamahome frowned.

"Then why not step forward and own up to it? Why dodge around it like this?" He demanded. "It seems sneaky and odd, Hotohori-sama. Why not just admit who he — or she — is up front?"

"Maybe they can't." Nuriko's expression became thoughtful. "If this came from Kutou, maybe that's where they are. Maybe they're even in some kind of danger themselves. Or…"

"Or maybe they're watching over things for us." Hotohori said quietly. "We all know that without Miaka, as Shichi Seishi we have little purpose. But as ourselves, on our own… perhaps whoever our shadowy messenger is, he seeks to do what he can for Kounan in the shadows in Kutou. Either way, I feel this missive came from a friend and not a foe. A contrary one, perhaps, with a unique way of addressing things. But I intend to take his warning seriously. Whoever he is and whyever he communicated this information to me, I would be a lax Emperor if I did not find some way of chasing it up."

"Saihitei-sama, do you intend to send a military force to the Eastern border?" Haku looked anxious, and Hotohori shook his head.

"I will consult with the Council and then decide the best course of action." He responded. "But I do intend to send some kind of party of investigation, whether they be in the armour of Kounan's Imperial Guard or in plain dress. I will not let anyone be hurt if I can prevent it. If Suzaku is trying to watch over us somehow, through one of us or through some other unknown hand… I will not ignore it."

"You seem in a hurry to quit the palace."

As they left the Emperor's study, Nuriko cast Tamahome a quizzical glance, and Tamahome frowned, shaking his head impatiently as he did so.

"It's nothing to do with you." He said simply. "I just have other

errands to run today. That's all."

"Errands?" Nuriko's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "What kind of errands, Tama-chan? This is all mysterious all of a sudden — don't tell me you've got a girl you're sneaking off to meet? What will I tell Miaka, if she comes back to find you've run off with some village wench?"

"Oh, don't be stupid." Tamahome said frankly. "It's not like that. But I came to the city to get a job, not to sit around and wait while nothing is going on. Being a Seishi is all very nice, but at the moment it's as the Emperor says. Miaka's not here and we have to do our own things. So I intend to do that too. And that means going into Eiyou and finding work."

"You're so stubborn." Nuriko sighed, tut-tutting under his breath. "You're living in the palace, effectively — what use do you have for more money? This is turning into an unhealthy obsession, Tama-chan. You do realise that, I hope? Money isn't the be all and end all of everything."

"That's none of your business either." Tamahome said smartly. "I told you, I'm not the kind of person to sit around and wait for nothing to happen. Miaka might come back but right now she's not here. And I'm bored. All right?"

He cracked his knuckles contemplatively.

"I need something more productive to do."

"To shut Miaka out of your brain, perhaps?" Nuriko asked archly, and Tamahome frowned.

"Miaka is nothing to do with this." He said flatly, although he knew that partly his companion's words rang true. "Just leave me be, all right? I'm not going far. I'll be back by nightfall, with any luck and I won't get into any trouble. I can take care of myself, you know — and anyone else who happens along the way."

"Men." Nuriko rolled his eyes. "Fine. Whatever. Get your machismo out of your system and I'll see you later. But its plain as the nose on your face, Tama-chan. You're missing Miaka and its driving you to distraction not knowing if and when she's coming back. You don't have to lie about it and pretend it's a noble effort to support yourself — you can tell Nuriko-neechan anything, after all."

"Will you shut up with that?" Tamahome grimaced. "Look, whatever you want to think. If I don't go now I won't be back before it's dark and I want to eat tonight as well. So stop spouting nonsense

and get out of my way, will you."

He gave his companion a light shove out of his way, and Nuriko sighed, stepping back and leaning up against the column as he gazed at his friend reproachfully.

"All right." he said at length. "But it had better not be another woman, Tamahome. I mean it. Miaka's a silly little idiot but I won't have you messing around with her head."

"You're only saying that because you don't want her to swing back towards Hotohori-sama." Tamahome said smartly, and as Nuriko's eyes widened, he felt a flicker of satisfaction curl up inside of him. "You see? I'm not the idiot you think I am."

He raised his hand in a wave.

"I said I'd be back later and I will be." He added. "So don't look so worried and don't wait up. It'll be fine… if you're that bored, go play in the harem until I get back. I can hear the clatter of coins calling to me even now — later, Nuriko. Don't wait up."

With that he sauntered out of the palace gate and round the back of the premises towards the place where Hotohori's fine stable of horses were kept. Inwardly hoping Nuriko wouldn't follow him, he greeted the grooms casually, asking them if they had a horse he could use for a quick ride into the country.

"After all, Miaka or no Miaka, it's been a while since I last went home." he murmured to himself as two of the young men scurried around to tack up a suitable beast. "And I promised them I'd bring coin soon, so I can't leave it any longer. Suzaku or not, if Miaka doesn't come back soon I'm going to have no choice but to quit this place and find a proper job. I can't just leave them hanging, not with Pa sick and them having to tend the farm and pay the doctor… I should have thought of it sooner, but at least I can take them what I have. And, with any luck, find a better way to provide for them. After all, at the moment, I'm the only one they've got to rely on!"

Writer's Note:

This is as far as I've written for this story… is anyone actually still reading it to the point that it's worth me trying to finish it…? It's not been reviewed in ages, so I'm guessing probably not, and I have been writing other things, but if people really do care about a conclusion I'll do my best to produce one ;)

Chapter 13

Chapter Twelve

"Well?"

The soldier glared down at Hou Jun with a malicious twinkle in his dark eyes. "Your name, stranger, and your reasons for trespassing on Kaiga land… you'd better have good ones, else we'll run you through an' make a meal of you for the local wolves."

"*Stop*!"

Before anyone could respond, a woman's voice cut through the conversation, and from his position pinioned to the ground, Hou Jun could hear the rustle of fine skirts as whoever his saviour was hurried across the grass towards them. "Stop that! Pull back from him — isn't it clear that he's a monk and unarmed?"

"Ruiren-sama!" For a moment the soldier hesitated, then drew back his weapon, although he did not remove his foot from Hou Jun's spine. "But Lord Gin said…"

"He told you to marshall trespassers and protect the estate." The lady said softly. "He didn't tell you to kill innocent men of faith. Kutou is seeking Seiryuu's blessing, surely… do you think the God will grant such things to ones who slay monks?"

At this, the soldier stepped back, and Hou Jun drew a shaky breath into his lungs, scrambling into a sitting position. His clothes were torn and muddy, he realised dully, but somehow the violence of the situation had dissipated with the appearance of the stranger and as he turned to face her, he found himself startled by what he saw. A young woman, both petite and fragile in her build had been the one to intervene in the escalating hunt, the fine fabric of her gown tinged with mud at the hem from her run through the forestland. At his gaze, she smiled.

"My apologies, monk." She said softly. "My husband's men are overly diligent at protecting the estate at times."

She glanced at the ring-leader, and her dark eyes clouded.

"Leave him to me." She said quietly. "Withdraw and I will not tell Lord Gin of your conduct. You know how dedicated your master is to Seiryuu and the Emperor's cause. Be glad that you didn't kill this man

today — else you'd surely face Housei's whip."

Despite himself, the man paled, and Hou Jun half found himself feeling sorry for this overzealous guard. Without a word the retainers withdrew, leaving the monk alone with his rescuer, and for a moment there was silence. Then the woman offered him a faint, awkward smile.

"Again, my apologies." She murmured. "For your journey to be so interrupted. This land has much need of spiritual guidance, and I… I wouldn't like things to become worse because Gin's men killed a monk."

"It's all right." Hou Jun assured her.

"You're hurt."

The woman bent at Hou Jun's side, concern flickering in her expression as she gestured towards the torn fabric of his trousers, and as he glanced down at his exposed kneecap the monk looked rueful, offering her a smile as he shook his head, scrambling to his feet.

"It's not what you think, you know." He said evenly. "Just an old battle scar — nothing important. You needn't look concerned — I'm quite all right."

He bowed his head in her direction.

"Thank you, by the way." He added. "A travelling monk has few defences against thugs or bandits, and even less it seems against trained family retainers."

"My husband's men are training hard to join the Imperial army." The woman looked troubled, leading her companion over towards a wooden bench carved from the boughs of a nearby tree and crafted to form a summer seat beneath the willow's spreading branches. She sighed, taking a seat as she indicated for the monk to join her.

"They are motivated to be the best they can as failure means disgrace and perhaps even worse. My husband is… a strict man. He doesn't accept failure in any form."

Hou Jun eyed the woman keenly, taking in the faint shadow of bruising on her cheek, and, despite her careful make-up and ornate appearance, he understood the depths of despair that glittered in her dark eyes. She truly was young — perhaps his own age, or a little more — with straight black hair that was pulled up in the style of a noble wife of Kutou. From the rings that adorned her fingers, Hou Jun knew her husband was a wealthy man who believed in decorating his

wife as some kind of trinket for show, and it was true that his companion was beautiful. However, it was a tragic kind of beauty, and Hou Jun found himself forming an unfavourable opinion of the person who had brought the sadness to those dark eyes.

"Will you tell me your name, traveller?" She asked at length, as the silence threatened to go on too long, and Hou Jun smiled, the moment of reflection gone. He nodded his head.

"Ri Hou Jun." He said evenly, knowing that even by giving his real name he would endanger noone. After all, he reflected pensively, Ri Hou Jun no longer existed. The world he had so innocently returned to in his dreams no longer waited for him, and all those who had ever known him by that name had moved on. He had no family behind him now, nor any roots to tie him down. Ri Hou Jun was just a ghost in the wind, and it mattered little if his name was spread all across Kutou.

He smiled, bowing his head towards her.

"Pleased to meet you."

"Likewise, Ri-san." The woman smiled, and Hou Jun saw that fragility once more in her gaze. "My name is Ruiren. K… Kaiga Ruiren."

"Hou Jun is fine, Ruiren-sama." Hou Jun assured her, absorbing as he did so the reluctance with which she gave her family name. "I am nothing but a common monk, after all — I wouldn't dare stand on formality with a lady of Kutou's nobility."

"Hou Jun-san, then." Ruiren managed a faint smile. "And you are right, when you call me a lady of Kutou — if such things can be said to truly exist."

She gestured towards the window of the outhouse.

"This estate belongs to my husband, Gin. This and all the land around it are Kaiga lands — you must have stumbled into them in error, but for his men to attack a passing monk is overzealous. I… perhaps I *should* speak to him, so it will not happen again."

"I think you would do better *not* to speak to him, Ruiren-sama." Hou Jun bowed his head towards her respectfully. "If it will cause you trouble on my account, I'd ask you not to. Soldiers are usually a reflection of the man who command them — equally retainers so eager for blood paint an unflattering picture of their lord. I wouldn't want you to be hurt because you tried to help someone like me."

“Hurt…?” Ruiren’s fingers went to her cheek almost automatically, and she smiled. “Gin’s men will not hurt me. You needn’t worry about that. They are too afraid of my husband and his houseman’s whip to challenge my authority… I am in no danger from them.”

“I was not referring to them.” Hou Jun shook his head, and Ruiren’s cheeks reddened as she interpreted his meaning.

“Gin *is*… a harsh man, at times.” She admitted softly. “And it is true that he rarely listens to anything that I have to say.”

“Then it seems you are in the worse position than I am.” Hou Jun reflected. “As a monk, it is my spiritual duty to help — is there nothing I can do to help you in return for your kindness to me?”

“What can a wife do against her husband?” Ruiren sent him a helpless look. “Gin is twice my age, and a powerful ally of the Emperor, Shoukitei. My position is a high-ranking one, with many servants and, Seiryuu forgive us, even slaves to serve our every need. We have lands and territory, and Imperial favour beyond most other high ranking noble families. What else should I ask for, living in such luxury and richness?”

“Freedom, perhaps.” Hou Jun’s mind flitted back to his first impression of Saihitei, the Emperor trapped in his gilded prison cell, and at his words, Ruiren sighed.

“I am Kaiga Gin’s wife.” She said simply. “I am Kaiga Gin’s property, therefore. My brother sold me into this match because it suited him to be allied with the Emperor’s friend. I accepted it for the same reason. I am not a strong person, Hou Jun-san. And I don’t deserve your sympathy. There are others… who deserve it more.”

Hou Jun eyed her keenly, then he spread his hands.

“Slaves are common in Kutou?” He asked softly, and Ruiren nodded.

“More and more so and the demand increases.” She agreed. “I should not speak of such things to a stranger, but… I have even heard tell of people kidnapped from other lands and brought to serve in bonds on Kutou estates. I’m telling you only because being a stranger or a wanderer in Kutou is a dangerous thing if you lack status or connections… without the protection of an Imperial associate, you too might…”

She faltered, and despite himself Hou Jun felt his heart going out to this weak-willed yet kind hearted young woman. Her spirit had more or less been broken, he realised, by years of abuse as Kaiga Gin’s

spouse, yet even so she was willing to risk her safety in trying to help preserve his.

“You don’t believe in slavery, I think.” He observed at length, and Ruiren shook her head.

“No.” She said bitterly. “No, I never have. My brother never sanctioned it, in the South, and I never saw it in such quantity until I came here to wed Gin seven or so years ago. I saw things that day I swear I wish I’d never seen — and every day since. No, Hou Jun-san, I do not believe in slavery. And yet nor am I strong enough to do anything about it. It makes me complicit in their suffering because I am weak and I cannot stand up to Gin’s will.”

Hou Jun was silent for a moment. Then,

“Ruiren means ‘tears of love’, doesn’t it?” He asked softly, and Ruiren snorted, nodding.

“It does.” She agreed. “Though I don’t understand why you’d comment on it — it has no real meaning in a place where love doesn’t truly exist. Tears, yes, I cry plenty of those. But love… is different. I do not love my husband — few noble wives ever do. And we are tools and pawns in their battles.”

“I think it’s pretty. That’s all.” Hou Jun eyed her keenly. “As are you, Ruiren-sama. In heart and soul as well as in appearance. Your husband may be a monster, but you are not. You shouldn’t be so hard on yourself, you know? Today you helped a strange monk with no connections or status to speak of, when he might have been cut down by soldiers in a blood haze. Sometimes it isn’t the big things any of us can do but the little things that are more important.”

“Little things?” Ruiren started, surprised, and Hou Jun smiled.

“Noone can save the world alone.” He said simply. “This is something I’ve come to understand during my life, and I believe it to be the truth. We all, after all, have our limitations. But that doesn’t mean that noone should try to reach beyond those limits. Even if all you can do is protect a stranger from harm, or show a little kindness to one who lacks it… that is enough. We are all different. We all have things we can and can’t do. But in the end, doing nothing is the only real crime. To act, even in a small way, is better than to stand by in silence. Don’t you think?”

“Are you saying… as a man of spiritual ways, that your advice to me would be to defy my husband?” Ruiren’s face whitened, and Hou Jun shook his head.

“I wouldn’t tell you to do anything so dangerous.” He told her firmly. “And I am in no position to tell you to do anything, Ruiren-sama. I’m just a travelling monk… no more, no less. I have no power or influence in this land, after all. But your heart aches and I can hear it, buzzing against my senses.”

“Then what?” Ruiren demanded. “I don’t understand — what are you saying, if not that?”

“Tears of love.” Hou Jun reflected, and Ruiren’s brows knitted together.

“I beg your pardon?”

“You told me that you had no love — that there was no love in Kutou, so your name was meaningless.” Hou Jun eyed her solemnly, meeting her gaze with his own lopsided one. “But I don’t think that’s true. Inside of you, it’s still there. Just like it is in everyone. Believing in this country — in its ability to love and, eventually, to change… that’s what you can do. Little things, Ruiren-sama. Little kindnesses. Little sparks of hope come in the most unexpected packages. You might not see it now — you may never see it, I don’t know for sure. I’m a monk, not a prophet or a seer. But I believe that someone’s good heart will always be rewarded in some way. Hold onto that, and you’ll find whatever that way is. I have faith in that at the very least, Ruiren-sama. That if you don’t give up on it, life won’t give up on you. And, in the end, you’ll find something you can truly love with all your heart.”

A strange expression crossed Ruiren’s features at this, as though something he had said had struck a chord deep within her. For a moment she did not speak, then, at length, she smiled.

“My husband will return soon.” She murmured. “He spends a lot of time at the palace with the Emperor, but it is not more than a short ride. You should not be here when he returns. You haven’t admitted to it, Hou Jun-san, but your accent is from the South — and Kounan are currently Kutou’s enemies. Therefore he would seek to hurt you — and I don’t want that. Not when you’ve spoken to me so kindly.”

“You realised that from the start?” Despite himself, Hou Jun was surprised, and Ruiren offered a rueful laugh, nodding her head.

“Perhaps I spoke to you so much because I’d given up hope for Kutou.” She admitted, embarrassed. “Because I hate being here so much that I thought, maybe, talking to someone from Kounan might somehow make my burden easier. Instead you’ve made me think again. Southern you might be, but you… you’ve re-awakened

something inside of me. Some desire to help heal this land — even if I can't do it, at least now I can think about it and, if there is a way… I can try."

"Be careful how you do." Hou Jun got to his feet. "Kounan do not want war with the East, but it will come and we will be on opposite sides, then. You belong to this land, and you shouldn't give up on it. I don't believe the Eastern peoples are evil any more than I believe the Southern ones are. But I think war will come. And then you should be very careful how you act, Ruiren-sama. Especially if you're following the advice of a Southern monk."

"Yes." Ruiren's eyes became thoughtful, and she nodded her head. "The advice of a Southern… Seishi."

Hou Jun started, despite himself, and Ruiren's smile widened.

"I am not a strong woman, and I am a coward." She admitted. "But I am not slow of wits, either. Your knee is not a battle scar, is it? As we spoke, I realised that. It's the mark of Suzaku — Kutou's divine enemy."

"But…" Hou Jun stared at her, and Ruiren's smile widened.

"You should cover it." She advised. "Don't worry. I will speak of it to noone — but if anyone else was to see…"

"Noone else will." Relief flickered in Hou Jun's expression. "But even knowing that Kounan and Kutou will be enemies, and realising that because of Suzaku's mark your Emperor probably seeks me out — why won't you betray me to your husband?"

"Because I'm going to believe in Kutou." Ruiren said frankly. "To begin with I said nothing because I was going to ask you to somehow spirit me away from this place. But I've changed my mind. There is something else… I think I might be able to do. Someone else… I can ask for help. And you being here has only strengthened that feeling inside of me. Not everyone in Kutou believes in the way things are now, after all. And perhaps there is something I can do… in some small way… to help my country recover. Even if it means taking risks."

"Ruiren-sama…"

"Go back to your land, Hou Jun-san." Ruiren shook her head. "For both our sakes, go. Leave Kutou. I won't ever speak of this meeting again, and nor must you. We are, as you said, on opposite sides of the fence. But I'll try… somehow… to do as you told me. To believe in Kutou and do whatever it is I can do for it, even if it is only a very

small thing. I am Kaiga Ruiren, after all. I am the wife of a powerful man."

She sighed.

"Even if I have no influence over him, and even if there proves to be nothing I can do politically, there is at least *something* I can do." She added. "And that is to make sure that, no matter what other ills befall them, I maintain my policy of kindness towards Gin's slaves. I have always tried, and I will keep trying. I cannot free them — if I did, Gin would hunt them down, torture them and slay them in a horrific way, so I dare not even try. But I will attempt to make their lives more acceptable… and hope that, at some point… there's something more I can do for them than that."

Hou Jun smiled, and slowly he nodded his head.

"Doing something is better than doing nothing." He said softly. "Even if it is very little indeed, Ruiren-sama, I'm sure they will appreciate your kindness."

"I wonder about that." Ruiren admitted. "But who knows. Perhaps you will be proven right, in the end. You've given me a faint glimmer of hope, Hou Jun-san. No… its *Chichiri*, isn't it? Chichiri bears the mark of the well… it's Chichiri who has so advised me, even though I am born of his native enemy's people."

"My life was once saved by people who lived within Kutou's borders, and my faith in life and myself partly restored to me by their kindness." Hou Jun said seriously, getting to his feet as he bowed his head towards his companion once more. "If I can reinstill that faith in someone else, my debt to Kutou's people is repaid. Take care, Ruiren-sama. Perhaps one day, when war is over, we'll somehow meet again."

"Maybe we will." Ruiren's eyes lit up faintly and she nodded her head. "And even if we don't, I'll try and do my best for as long as I can. For Kutou and for the people here, if I can… I promise, Chichiri. I'll try."

"And I'll try and do the same for Kounan, in whatever way I can to prevent bloodshed." Hou Jun lifted his *kasa*, tipping it briefly in Ruiren's direction. Then he cast his spell, drawing his life force up inside of the straw hat as he focused his energy on the Shouryuu and the northern region of Kounan where he had spent so many happy years as a child.

As he re-emerged from his *kasa*, he caught sight of the swift-flowing Shouryuu-gawa, and a glitter of nostalgia and pain sparkled in his

ruby gaze.

“This place still makes me feel like this.” He mused inwardly, kneeling at the river’s edge as he ran his fingers through the swift-running water. “But at least these days it gives me purpose as well as suffering. There are still a lot of questions I have, and a lot of things that I may never fully resolve inside of myself. But so long as I’m here for Kounan’s sake — and to do Suzaku’s bidding — it doesn’t matter. Hou Jun’s crimes and mistakes are Hou Jun’s to deal with. But I’m Chichiri now, and I have to move on. Like Ruiren-sama — I have to do the little I can do to make a difference and hope that somehow it will be enough. My magic is growing stronger, and I’m gaining confidence in my judgement. Taiitsukun has faith in me too, I know… and soon I’ll no doubt meet Suzaku no Miko.”

He sighed.

“That’ll be the real test, won’t it?” He reflected out loud, glancing up at the sky as a brief image of first Hikou then Kouran flickered across his vision. “Wherever you both are, and however much you hid from me, I still hope that part of you is somewhere, helping me to move forward and do what I have to do for this country. One day perhaps I’ll understand, and that day I’ll be able to lay you both to rest properly in my heart. But for now, I need you with me… no matter how slight the sensation. To be Chichiri — to be someone we never knew I’d have to be — give me strength, both of you. To move on and up and save Kounan from the tempest that I feel sure is about to come.”

Well, at the very least they had greeted him with smiles.

Tamahome tightened his grip on his horse’s reins, his expression preoccupied as he rode along the uneven stone-studded pathway that led to the main route into Eiyou. As he forced his beast into a gallop, keen to avoid the setting sun, he remembered the warm shrieks of his young siblings as they had filled the tiny house with joy and laughter, yet even so he was not oblivious. When he had been by their side each day, it had been harder to notice the gradual changes that the harshness of their situation had wrought in even the most robust member of the young family. But after his time away, it had been painfully clear that though they still smiled, his siblings were thinner than before and his father’s cough had deepened into one which wracked through the entirety of his fragile frame.

He had lied to himself for a long time about his father’s health, wanting to believe that the man could recover. But the short few

hours he had spent in the village had forced him to face the reality of the situation. With his brother struggling to hold their meagre farm together, Tamahome knew that he felt only guilt in the fact he had a sumptuous palace room to return to.

"At least this time I had a few coins to bring them, and that'll pay for Father's medicine and some food, at least." He mused, digging his toes into the ribs of the horse once more as he urged it to go yet faster. "I hope it will be enough. I didn't like Father's cough. Even though I'm not a doctor — I guess I don't have to be, when it's as blatant as that."

Yet even though they were struggling, they had still been happy to see him. Tamahome pursed his lips, his thoughts flickering briefly to Miaka, and he sighed, suddenly resentful for the burden she had placed on him.

"Appear in this world, turn my life upside-down and then disappear, leaving me to pick up the pieces." He muttered, clenching his fists so tightly that his nails dug into the palms of his hand. "Damn you, Miaka. No wonder I always steered clear of women. They only get in the way and make things complicated. She might never come back, yet I'm still fussing about her. Damn it! My family are more important than anything else… I can't just sit around forever while they're starving and dying without me!"

As this thought crossed his mind, he veered across the track into the forest, taking a short-cut past the local villages that dotted the area. Each of them was, he knew, richer than his own, and somehow he knew that he did not want to see other people prospering at that moment. His father's thin, gaunt features haunted his thoughts, and he muttered another curse, wishing that he could find the money to get the man to a city physician.

For a brief moment he considered asking the Emperor for help, but almost immediately discarded it. He had no desire to be in the man's debt, and besides, he would be a poor son indeed if he couldn't find a way to handle his own family's problems. He had given them his word that he would come through, and he would keep it. No matter what happened, he would not let them down.

Not even if Miaka came back.

So deep in thought was he that he almost did not see the fallen trunk of an old tree blocking the path and with an exclamation he yanked on the reins, causing his steed to rear and whinny a protest at the sudden roughness of his actions. Tamahome had been riding since

he had been small, however, so he did not lose his seating, instead reaching down to pat the disgruntled beast's sweat-drenched neck.

"Better we stop than you lame yourself on that." He said softly. "Hotohori-sama wouldn't be amused if I brought you back with bloody, broken knees. And then I'd have to pay for that, as well… which I can't afford to do right now."

The horse knickered softly, but seemed to be calmed by his words, and Tamahome braced himself, then dismounted, taking the reins and looping them loosely around a low branch of a nearby tree as he stepped forward to examine the blockage.

The trunk was indeed a monster, from a tree that had seen many more summers than Kounan's people could even dream of. It was old and rotted in places, with jagged remains of tree branches jutting out at unforgiving intervals, and Tamahome's brows knitted together.

"Broken knees would've been the least of it. You'd have been skewered." he realised, turning to glance at his steed as he did so. "Even more reason to be glad I pulled you up. You know it too, don't you?"

He frowned, bending down to touch the wood. Though most of the tree seemed to have been formed from dead wood, there had been no storms in recent days which could have had the strength to bring down such a huge specimen, and as he gazed at it, an uneasy feeling settled at the back of his mind. Though common sense told him he should re-mount his horse and find another root, something drew him to examine all sides of the tree, and as he reached the base, his heart clenched in his throat.

Instead of the torn remains of a tree ripped from it's base by the cruel twist of some wind, the base was far more smooth and almost flat, as though it had been cut by a woodman's axe. More, it did not seem as though it had been down long, for the cuts still oozed with fresh sap across the sections which had still clung to life.

Someone had blocked the path on purpose, then.

Instinctively Tamahome glanced around him, feeling the warmth of Suzaku's mark darting across his brow as he prepared himself for an ambush.

"Come out, wherever you are!" He demanded. "I know you are, so there's no point in lurking in the bushes like a coward! If you want a fight I'll fight you — put yourself where I can see you!"

"Peasants are so violent, aren't they?"

A woman's smooth voice came from behind him and Tamahome wheeled around, staring at her in wary confusion as she stepped carefully out of the trees. A single glance told him that she was too slightly built to have brought the tree down on her own, yet noone else emerged, and as the stranger stepped towards him, Tamahome felt his unease growing.

"Who the hell are you?"

"I'm more interested in who you are." There was something distinctive in the woman's accent, and with a jolt Tamahome was reminded of Hotohori's words about the message from Kutou. He stared at the stranger anew, half-wondering whether the odd, slightly gutteral note in the interloper's voice was the faintest hint of an Eastern accent, and that the mysterious letter writer's fears were being borne out, after all.

"The *oni-shounen*, I presume?" The woman eyed him in amusement, her gaze fixed on his brow, and Tamahome cursed, covering his forehead with his hand as he realised too late that his character had been blazing clear enough for all to see. The woman laughed, shaking her head.

"It's no use covering it now. I already know that's who you are." She said softly.

"What do you want with me?" Tamahome demanded, lowering his hand. "To fight me? I don't fight women, so you're going to have to think again."

"I was sent to find you, and others like you." The woman offered him a cold smile.

"Why?" Tamahome snapped back. "And you can't tell me that it was an errand from the Emperor, because I know it wasn't."

"*An* Emperor, perhaps." The woman said silkily, and Tamahome's heart clenched again as he realised how close he still was to his village in the vulnerable area of Kusou-ken. He cursed, shaking his head.

"So it's true. Kutou's people really are after attacking us." He murmured, and the woman shrugged her shoulders.

"I never said I was from Kutou." She said dismissively. "Just that I had come to find you. It's an honour, after all, to be face to face with a Stellar Warrior. Tamahome, I think? The *oni-shounen* that's the talk of the city in Eiyou. I had to see you for myself. It's nice to know the rumours were true."

“You can’t tell me you were just sent to gawp at me.” Tamahome snapped, and the woman shook her head. With a slick flick of her wrist, something silver glinted in her hand and Tamahome swore, realising she had drawn a knife.

“To find you and to kill you.” She said lightly. “It’s nothing personal, but orders are orders.”

“I already told you that I don’t fight women.”

“That’s why I came after you, you foolish boy.” The woman scolded him. “Because I know already that you’ve got something of a reputation for saving helpless young women from thugs and bandits. Don’t you? I know all about you. The *oni-shounen* stories are spread far and wide across this miserable land, not just in the city of Eiyou. You’re a legend, even though noone knows your real name. It must be nice, mustn’t it, for a peasant boy to excite so much attention? But it’s your downfall, too. I know you won’t fight a woman. But I will fight you. So that leaves you at a disadvantage. Doesn’t it?”

Tamahome gazed at her for a moment. Then he sighed, raising his hands over his head as he gauged her movements.

“I guess you got me.” He said quietly. “You did your homework… I guess it paid off.”

“I guess it did.” The woman took a step closer, and Tamahome could see that the weapon she held was well-polished and carefully crafted — the tell-tale blade of a hired assassin. He frowned, his gaze flitting briefly to his horse, who still stood silently beneath the tree, a few paces away. If he could get there, he knew he could outrun the woman and with his superior knowledge of the countryside, escape her completely. Yet he had no way to know whether the blade was laced with poison, or, as a worse thought hit him, whether she already knew where he had come from that afternoon.

Had she seen him leave the village? Or had she just happened on his trail as he had returned to Eiyou?

“I have one question for you.” The woman continued slowly. “Before I take your life, *oni-shounen*.”

“I don’t think the promise of being killed is a good way to get anyone to answer questions, woman.” Tamahome told her curtly, and the stranger laughed, nodding her head.

“It could be the difference between a quick and a slow death, however.” She said conversationally. “I want to know whether the other story in Eiyou is true. Whether or not there truly is a woman in

Kounan who goes by the name of Suzaku no Miko."

Tamahome stared at her for a moment. Then a wry smile touched his lips, and slowly he shook his head.

"There ain't." He said frankly. "I don't know what you've been told, or who you got your information from. But there's no wench in Kounan by that name. Not here or anywhere else. I swear it by the stars under which us Seishi are blessed, an' even on Suzaku himself. Suzaku no Miko is not in Kounan — or even in the ShijinTenchishou. She isn't here. Not here or anywhere. No matter how hard you look, you can't find something when it isn't there."

The woman's eyes narrowed, and she pursed her lips.

"You swear by the God for whom you work, *oni-shounen*?" She asked softly, and Tamahome nodded.

"I swear." He said frankly, meeting her gaze head on. "Suzaku no Miko is not here."

The woman tut-tutted.

"I don't know whether to be pleased or disappointed by that." She admitted. "Either way, though, to take your life is enough for today."

She launched herself towards him, but by this time Tamahome had anticipated her and he leapt aside, grabbing his horse's reins and pulling himself into the saddle even as he unwound the leather thongs from their branch. The woman cursed, launching her weapon at him with a surprising amount of force, and Tamahome wheeled the animal around just in time to protect it from being impaled. As the cold metal scraped against his arm he winced, but did not falter, pressing his toes firmly to the horse's flanks as he urged the beast into a gallop.

As though she understood his fears, the beast reacted instantly, charging through the trees as though her tail had been set alight, and Tamahome grasped tightly to the reins, inwardly hoping and praying that his gamble had paid off. He had, after all, left the palace unarmed — and more, even though his enemy had been willing to slay him, he had no wish to kill a woman.

As they broke onto open terrain, his gaze darkened, taking in the seeping blood that soaked through to his sleeve. He glanced behind him, making out a faint shape in the distance, and a mixture of relief and consternation flooded through him as he realised that his pursuer had not given up her chase.

"Still, better she come after me than go after my family." He

muttered. “If she’s coming this way it means she’s more interested in killing a Seishi. And that she probably doesn’t know where my family are, yet. So much to the good. I’ll lead her right back to the palace guard… that’ll teach her.”

His arm stung and tingled, and he frowned, wondering whether or not her blade had been laced with poison after all.

“Another thing to worry about, when I get back.” He told himself darkly, forcing his horse into a yet faster gait as he made out the distant skyline of Kounan’s capital city. “Guess if I want to go see my family, I’m going to have to be damn careful about it from now on. If being one of Miaka’s Seishi is goin’ to put them in danger, then maybe it is time I left the palace and disappeared into hiding after all. Whatever the hell Kounan might need me for… at the end of the day, the folk at home are my priority.”

“Choukou, huh.”

Hou Jun materialised on the slopes leading down to the northern city, a frown crossing his face as he gazed across the landscape towards the familiar settlement.

As a child, he reflected, he had come here often with his father, on some political errand or other. The city official had considered it good training for his son to see other towns and be able to compare them with his own position in Souen, and as Hou Jun turned his gaze, he could make out the uneven skyline of his father’s old hunting ground in the distance.

They were, after all, a bare hillside apart, and deep inside his heart, Hou Jun felt a sense of bittersweet nostalgia wash through him.

“Souen and Choukou. I thought I’d never be brave enough to walk through the Northern territories like this… but yet, here I am.” He mused, turning his gaze back towards Choukou. “This isn’t far from the place where a stranger saved my life, I’m sure. I don’t remember much at all about that day — only that something warm slipped through my pain and took some of it away. But I’m sure it was here. Somewhere. Near Choukou.”

He held out his hands, stretching his senses out across the land as he searched for the faint flicker of Suzaku’s aura that had brought him here in the first place. As he had walked along the Shouryuu river bank, something had twitched at the back of his mind, and without thinking he had followed it, finding himself here, on the outskirts of his past.

Yet even as he walked slowly down the slope towards the Choukou city walls, something dark and oppressive began to reach him, and he faltered, consternation flooding his masked face as he struggled to make sense of it.

He had not noticed it to begin with, he realised. He had been too caught up with the nostalgia of the location to recognise the dire change that had been wrought across the city that he remembered from so long ago. But now, as he gazed ahead, he found it was unmistakeable. Something thick with pain and misery oozed from the city limits, choking and stifling the air and though Hou Jun could not physically see its shadow, he knew that it was as though the whole place was smothered by dark clouds.

“What is this?” He murmured, moving cautiously towards Choukou’s gates as he reached his senses out once more in search of that faint flicker of Suzaku’s energy. “What’s happened to this place?”

He reached the city walls, placing a tentative hand against the stone structure and as he did so, something dark and empty rushed through him, causing him to stumble and fall back in surprise and dismay. He gazed up at the sky, swallowing hard as he struggled to catch his breath.

“Something evil is inside this place.” He whispered. “Something strong that I don’t know how to fight. But I can’t… I can’t just leave it here. I’m Chichiri, aren’t I? I should be ready to fight any threats to Suzaku’s people. I shouldn’t just walk away because I don’t understand. Besides, I felt Suzaku’s presence here, even if it was only faint. Surely it would be best for me to find out who and where that sensation was coming from, before I turn tail like a coward and run away?”

He got resolutely to his feet, approaching the city gates a second time, but with every step he took the air around him grew heavier and more polluted and by the time he reached the entrance itself, he found himself clinging to the edge of the gate as he struggled to draw air into his lungs. Whatever it was, he realised as he gasped in air, it was too strong and too concentrated for him to even make the faintest amount of difference. It was a flood of depression and despair, left to hang over the people and rot through to their very souls, and with a jolt Hou Jun realised that his own soul was still far too unsettled to be able to fight against such a force.

“My own pain is too fresh.” He murmured, tears touching his gaze as his grip tightened on Choukou’s gate. “I can’t enter. It’s too strong… my senses are too sharp. And my grief is too raw, still.

There's nothing I can do here."

He staggered back, feeling disappointed and deflated as he dropped onto the grass, drawing huge gulps of air into his lungs. Noone had taken the slightest bit of notice of his appearance, he realised, and the few souls he had briefly seen through the haze had seemed strange and disjointed to his Suzaku senses.

"Choukou is suffering, and I have to walk away." He muttered, inwardly berating his weakness as he accepted there was no way he could free the city on his own. "Maybe, when Suzaku's people are assembled… maybe then. Maybe Suzaku no Miko will have the power that I don't have."

He pulled himself stiffly to his feet, and as he did so, he felt the distinctive twinge of something against his senses. His eyes widened, his self-remonstrations forgotten as he locked onto the brief sensation, building it into a stronger image in his mind.

"Suzaku." He whispered. "So I was right. One of Suzaku's people is here. I thought, originally, in Choukou… but with that heavy cloud hanging over the city, I suppose not. But there is still one of Suzaku's people here, nonetheless. And if I can't save Choukou, I will at least find this person. And find out what I can. For the sake of Suzaku no Miko, I must."

With that fresh resolve in mind, he pulled his *kasa* from it's travel position, casting a brief spell over it.

"For Kounan's sake." He whispered, as his magic surrounded him, pulling him into the dark abyss of the hat. "I won't forget about you, Choukou. Somehow, we'll find a way to set you free — *I promise*."

Chapter 14

Chapter Thirteen

As the sun began to set over the landscape, a lone figure stood at the edge of a cluster of trees, leaning against the broad trunk of one as he gazed across the horizon.

So the North was further away than he'd imagined, then.

Having never left the confines of his local area before, Genrou felt almost like he had entered a foreign land on stepping into the nothern region of Kounan. Though dress was similar to that in his own town, somehow the whole region had a completely different feel to it and, where dry land and mountainous terrain was common near his home, here there were swathes of flat farming land with the green of crops stretching out in all directions. Through the centre of all this rich harvest flowed the slick waters of a wide river, and on the banks, dotted at rough intervals settlements had grown up to take advantage of its easy access.

"The North are frigging rich, in other words." He muttered, dropping down to the floor and crossing his legs as he let out a heavy sigh. "No wonder this is where I had t'come. But I hope it ain't goin' to cost me an arm an' a leg to pay for any remedies. I ain't got so much coin on me, an' if everythin' in the North is like this, I'm never goin' to afford it."

He closed his eyes, reflecting for a moment on the vague information he had been given. Along the way he had heard stories and rumours of a doctor in the North country who could cure any disease, and he had immediately placed his whole hopes in finding this individual without stopping to think about how difficult finding one person might be, or how much it might cost to convince him to travel all the way back south.

Yet deep down Genrou knew he wasn't going to give up. With all the tenacity of a hunting wolf, he had made his decision, and he knew he had come too far to back away now. He would find this doctor, somehow — no matter how difficult. For Hakurou's sake, he would.

The rustle of tree branches behind him jerked him back to awareness and he swung around, hand already half-grasped around the hilt of his sword as he scanned the surroundings for any sign of

company. At first he could see nothing, but he had not been a bandit fighting against Kaou-zan for nothing, and his bronze eyes narrowed, fanged teeth protruding over his lips as he scoured the dense forestland once more. He was a stranger to these parts, after all, but he was in no doubt that just as he and his brethren ruled the South-West territories, there were like-minded rogues to lay claim to this fertile land.

"Come out!" He called, scrambling to his feet and tightening his grasp around the sword hilt. "If you're lookin' for a fight, I'm game."

There was the sound of laughter, and Genrou's gaze darted across the forest to the furthermost dark corner, making out for the first time the faintly shadowed outline of a man. He frowned, standing up straight as he drew his weapon from it's sheath.

"Why are you following me, stranger?" He asked softly. "If you want t'talk to me, you ain't doin' any good hidin' out there. Come an' speak to me face to face. It's been a long journey, an' I could do with shakin' some cobwebs."

"You travel quickly." The stranger obediently showed himself, and Genrou's heart clenched as he recognised the man's attire. It was identical to that worn by the man who had assaulted his sister, and instinctively he tensed, knowing who this stranger was without having to voice the question.

At his change in expression, the stranger chuckled, nodding his head.

"Yes, I've come from Souun, to track you down." He said lightly. "You know why, I think, my friend."

"You like sight-seeing?" Genrou suggested, and the other man snorted, his gaze darkening.

"I know you killed my partner." He said softly. "You might be able to cover it up, but I'm not foolish. I know that you and he crossed swords and that you cut him down. And I don't take well to that kind of insult against any of my comrades. Young men like you are quick to spill blood and slow to learn from their mistakes. I'm here to teach you that lesson — this is as far as you're going to go, Wolf of Reikaku-zan."

"Wolf of…" For a moment Genrou faltered, then he shook his head.

"You got it wrong, buddy." he said frankly, tossing his sword from palm to palm as he squared himself for a fight. "In all ways, you've got it wrong. Your buddy was in the wrong place at the wrong time,

s'all. I don't take kindly to men assaultin' any woman. An' when it's one o' my sisters, I take it even less kindly. He got what was comin' to him. That's all. An' as for bein' Reikaku-zan's wolf…"

He smirked.

"*Hakurou-sama* is Reikaku-zan's wolf." He concluded, shifting his stance into an offensive pose. "I'm jus' one of his lackeys, at the end of the day. Your buddy got whipped by a second in command — an' you're about t'be too. How about it? Is that even more of an 'insult' to you an' your freak-ass comrades?"

"You little…" Anger darted across the man's gaze and he launched forward, clashing the metal of his blade against Genrou's bandit weapon with enough force to knock the bandit to the ground, and Genrou cursed as he saw the weapon fly into the branches of a nearby tree, sending the tree-top shaking and a flustered cloud of birds screaming up into the darkening skies. This man was not like the other, he realised belatedly. This man was not someone who would be distracted by the lure of a woman or make the mistake of being caught in a difficult situation. This man was steely, hardened and trained for fighting. And now, without his sword to defend himself, Genrou knew that the odds had shifted badly against him.

He gazed up at the glinting sword-hilt, swearing again as he realised that even if he could jump up to reach it, it was embedded deeply enough in the tree to bring the whole thing down on top of them.

"You have a smart mouth for one so young and green. *You're* the one who'll be cut down." His opponent caught his glance, immediately moving to block Genrou's path. "Face your opponent, fool, rather than stare after a weapon lost. I've been fighting for longer than you've been alive, you half-witted boy. What makes you think that you can beat me, when I've so much experience and all you can do is shout and wave your sword like an untrained mountain chimp?"

He darted forward, sword once more primed as he bore down on his prey.

"So you're an *old* scrawny dude. That's even better." Genrou shot back, drawing on his strength as he threw his opponent away from him, scrambling to his feet. "But I told you, you'll have to move quicker. I ain't so green as you think I am, old man, so you'll have to guess again. If you're that geriatric, you'll have real trouble matching my pace."

"Or, perhaps, your ego." The man said coldly, and the slash of the

blade shimmered between them once more. Instinctively Genrou raised his right arm to defend himself, hitting out hard against his rival's bony, sinewy hand as he sought to knock the blade free a second time. The cloaked figure was not so easily disarmed, however, and he kept his grip, wheeling around and bringing the blade down hard across Genrou's forearm. Blood spilled from the wound as the white fabric binding his limb fell away, and Genrou cursed in the most colourful of bandit language, grasping his wounded arm in his hand as he glared at his opponent.

"Lucky swing." He said thickly. "Won't happen again."

"No. Next time it'll be your heart." The man told him coldly, and Genrou could tell that his opponent was bracing himself for another assault. He gritted his teeth, swinging his body out of the man's path as he prepared himself for a renewed attack. His arm stung and he could feel the sensation of blood running down it, but he forced the thought from his mind, focusing all his attention on the stranger in the shadows.

The knife came at him again, but this time Genrou had the man's measure and he leapt up onto a rough-edged boulder, kicking the blade away and sending it flying across the clearing, watching with some satisfaction as it embedded itself in the earth a good distance away.

"Now we're on even terms, coward." He said with a wolfish grin, his sharp, almost fanged teeth giving him a veritable lupine appearance as he approached his foe anew, a cocky swagger to his gait even despite the blood that still dripped down his bleeding right arm. The last of the fabric bandaging had long since fallen away in the struggle, and as the cloaked figure launched himself on Genrou with a cry of rage, the young bandit forced the pain from his mind, parrying the attack and throwing the other man down onto the ground.

"You're not so smart without your little toy, are ya?" He asked lightly. "I told you — I'm no pushover. You really should'a listened, shouldn't you — if it was your buddy I took out in the barn, you should'a been prepared for me and what I can do. Shouldn't ya?"

He rubbed his hands together in satisfaction.

"Now, maybe you can tell me who you're workin' for and *why* they're so keen on knocking me off." He added. "Why did your friend attack my family, anyway? Is it me you're after, all along? Is that why you people came to the farm — to provoke me into fighting? Because I don't need provocation, buddy. I'll fight ya for free, if it's always as

much fun as this."

He grinned again, his eyes glittering with energy and enthusiasm, and despite himself, the man faltered. Then, as his gaze rested on Genrou's bleeding arm, he let out a gasp of disbelief.

"So you *are* the one we came to find." He murmured. "A runtish, ugly, red-headed farmer's boy is truly one of Suzaku's chosen men? Our intelligence was correct, after all. One of Suzaku's people really was in that pointless little mountain town."

"Hey, who are you callin' ugly! And wait… Suzaku's what now?" At this, Genrou faltered, dismay in his gaze, and the man smirked, flicking his fingers in the direction of his opponent's arm.

"You bear the mark of that bird on your arm." He said softly. "You are stupid enough to fight me unarmed and believe you can win, but you can't be so stupid as to be ignorant of what that symbol means."

Genrou cursed as his own gaze was drawn towards his injured limb, clamping his hand over the 'wings' symbol that blazed bright and strong against his skin.

"I'm a bandit, I'm not some stupid Suzaku anything." He said frankly. "I don't know what you're talkin' about, but if you can't tell a battle scar from some divine mark, you're the one in trouble, idiot."

The man narrowed his gaze, slowly shaking his head. With a flick of his wrist, Genrou suddenly realised that he held a new blade in his hand, and before he could move, it had come whirling across towards him, piercing the fabric of his shirt and pinning him firmly to the trunk of the tree.

"I told you you were a fool." The stranger approached, now standing close enough that Genrou could feel his breath on his cheek, and he grimaced, trying to turn his face away.

"Your breath really stinks something awful." He complained. "What've you been eating?"

"You know as well as I do what that mark on your right arm means. I'm not fooled by your bravado or by your lies." The man drew even closer, pulling his weapon from its resting place in the ground, and Genrou felt the prick of the original blade up against his throat. "My comrade and I were sent here to destroy one of the Suzaku Shichi Seishi. I began to think we'd taken the wrong path, when all we discovered was you and your family. My comrade became distracted by your sister, then you killed him, and I decided I'd stay around to avenge him, whatever else I did. Now I'm glad of it. You are the one I

came to find, and I *will* kill two birds with one stone, as it were."

He brushed a finger against the '*tsubasa*' character, laughing at his own joke, and Genrou flinched his arm away, struggling to get a grip on the knife. The prick at his throat grew sharper, however, and he faltered, realising for the first time that his life was in very real danger.

"Kill the Suzaku Seven. That was the meaning of our quest here. To find you out and kill you. *Tasuki*."

"I'm *not* Tasuki. You're the one who's an idiot, believing in some stupid, dead legend!"

But even as he said it, Genrou's mind was once more drawn back to his arrival at Reikaku-zan, and the way his leader had explained the strange red mark that glittered on his lower right arm.

"*The mark of Tasuki. A sign that you'll one day leave Reikaku-zan."*

And here he was, Genrou realised with a jolt. Miles from Reikaku-zan, as though his leader's words had already begun to come true. His gaze narrowed as he struggled against his opponent's grip, but the blade point scratched against his throat, and his captor chuckled.

"You fight well, for a boy." He said softly. "But you're not my equal. Even if you have Suzaku's blood running through your veins… you're still not capable of defeating someone with so much more battle experience."

Genrou opened his mouth to respond, but before he could find words, something whooshed through the gap between the two men, sending the assailant's weapon flying into the sky above their heads. Startled, both men froze, staring at the now levitating weapon as it hovered just out of their reach. Then, with a shimmer, it soared into the hollowed trunk of an old tree, disappearing completely from sight.

"What the…" The assailant's eyes widened, and Genrou found himself scarcely more able to act as the copse was surrounded by a strange light. In the shadows, silhouetted by the glow of whatever strange power had come to their aid, the bandit could just make out the outline of a human being, but before he could react, he heard the muttering of spell words and with a yelp, the assailant stumbled backwards, falling against the ground and disappearing from sight.

Genrou's eyes almost popped out of his head, and he swallowed hard, taking a tentative step or two towards the place where the man had disappeared.

“It’s all right, you know. I only sent him someplace else. It’s quite safe — you won’t fall in after him.”

The man’s voice broke through his confusion, and he turned, staring at the stranger as he stepped forward, lowering the hood of his cloak and meeting Genrou’s gaze with a smile.

“You look startled.” He said unecessarily. “I’m sorry. You were in danger, so I suppose I acted without thinking about it.”

“No… I guess… it’s okay.” Genrou glanced back at the ground, then at the stranger once more. “Where did you send him? And how, dammit? What the hell kind of magic was that?”

“It was just a simple transferance spell.” The stranger shrugged his shoulders. “I’m a travelling priest by trade. Sorcerer, if you like. I don’t believe in violence and I dislike fighting. I don’t know what his battle was with you, but it’s against my beliefs to stand back and see anyone killed.”

“So he isn’t… dead?”

“No. I told you. I sent him someplace else.” The stranger removed his cloak, setting it down on the ground and settling himself on it. “You seem tired… have you been travelling a long way? Your accent isn’t local, so I imagine you must’ve come some distance, you know.”

Genrou stared at the oddity again, and the sorcerer laughed.

“I’m sorry. I haven’t introduced myself.” He said contritely, holding out his hand. “My name is Ri Hou Jun. Pleased to meet you, Suzaku no Tasuki-sama.”

“Suzaku no…” Genrou froze, and the sorcerer nodded his head.

“It’s not hard to tell, you know.” He said simply, gesturing to Genrou’s still bared arm. “That’s a nasty gash, too. You should take a moment to clean it, before it gets infected.”

Genrou clasped his fingers over the mark once more, a clouded look entering his bronze eyes, but as though he guessed the young man’s thoughts, the sorcerer shook his head.

“It’s all right. Your secret is safe with me.” He assured him lightly. “I’m not your enemy, Tasuki-san. I’m from Kounan just as surely as you are. We all have a part to play, after all. No matter what path we choose to follow.”

“You’re a weird’un, ain’t you?”

Tasuki took in his companion’s appearance afresh, scrutinising the

stranger's features carefully. An ordinary looking man stared back at him, long dark hair in a tail over his shoulder and amiable red-brown eyes meeting his with openness and warmth. He was older, Genrou decided, perhaps in his thirties or even forties, yet he had the graceful movement of a younger man, and somehow Genrou knew that despite the unremarkable appearance, this was someone who was anything *but* ordinary.

"Weird? How so?" Hou Jun seemed genuinely surprised, and Genrou sighed, dropping down onto the ground beside him.

"Why did you really help me? Because you think I'm Tasuki? Because I'm tellin' you…"

"I told you that, didn't I?" Hou Jun cut across him smoothly. "Because I'm opposed to violence. And killing. I don't like death. That's why I intervened. You're far too young, after all, to die yet."

He cocked his head on one side.

"How old *are* you, Tasuki-san?"

"Seventeen, just about." Genrou bristled. "An' don't call me that. I told you. I'm not interested in Suzaku or any of that shit. This mark just appears. It's nothin' to do with me or my decisions."

"You haven't given me any other name to call you by, yet." Hou Jun said reasonably. "And it would be rude just to call you 'you', now wouldn't it? We've only just met, after all."

He winked.

"I hoped you might take pity on a sorcerer's loneliness and share a campfire with me tonight." He added. "In which case, it seems right that I should know your name, doesn't it?"

"Share a…?" Genrou was taken off guard, then he shrugged. "Shit, I guess it can't hurt. You did help me out, after all, an' I pay my dues. Sure. Whatever. I don't mind."

He glanced at his blooded hand, wiping it clean ruefully on the grass. Then he grasped Hou Jun's extended fingers in his, shaking them firmly.

"Genrou." He said frankly, feeling a faint prickle of something as their hands met. "That's my name. Genrou."

"Genrou." Hou Jun looked thoughtful, lowering his hand. "So that's why that man called you a wolf, is it?"

"Mm. I guess." Genrou frowned. "I don't know. I don't really want

to talk about it… he an' his buddy pissed me off enough already, an' I have other things on my mind."

"Such as?"

"It's not really your problem."

"No, I suppose not. My apologies." The sorcerer held up his hands. "I've a habit of prying into things I don't have any business prying into. For all you know I might be their ally — and you're right to be wary of me. I shouldn't be so eager to trust — after all, they say a war is coming to the South, and it's hard to know who's a friend and who's an enemy in this climate."

"No kidding." Genrou sighed. "I want to go back to the mountain. It's less messed up than here. But…"

He paused, then shook his head.

"I don't think you're one o' them." He admitted. "I don't know why, but you don't seem like you are."

He glanced up at his sword, still lodged in the tree branch, and Hou Jun followed his gaze, a smile touching his lips.

"That's no use to you up there." He reflected, raising his hand and, as Genrou watched, the blade shook itself free from its resting place, dropping down neatly into the earth at the bandit's right hand. "There you are. You shouldn't leave weapons like that lying around, after all."

"You really are weird." Genrou grasped his sword, returning it to its scabbard. "Are there lots of people in the north like you?"

"No." The sorcerer looked sad, shaking his head. "No, I think I'm the only one. Which is why it's nice to have company for a change, Genrou-san."

He smiled, but the sadness didn't completely leave his gaze.

"And in return for your company, I'll teach you something you can take with you, the next time you're called to fight." He added. "That is, if you're willing to learn."

So, the woman had buckled to him after all.

Nakago set down the scroll, a smile of satisfaction twitching at the edge of his lips as he ran over the message in his mind once more.

"*If my Lord Shougun is so willing, I place myself in his hands and his*

trust for the saving of Kutou."

The words echoed through his thoughts, as though spoken before him, and he nodded his head. In those brief, ambiguous words he knew that Kaiga Ruiren had reached out to him as someone who could save her from her hell, and he got slowly to his feet, sauntering across the darkened chamber to the flickering fire that burnt in the furthermost corner. With a flick of his wrist he deposited the curled parchment into the heart of the flames, watching thoughtfully as it burnt.

He knew already that Kaiga Ruiren was the younger sister of the Southern Lord, You Kanshi, who had railed against slavery for as long as he had held power in the border province. For a long time, Nakago had dismissed this man's influence outside of his own territory as being worthless, for Kanshi had not come to the capital city in some time, and few of Shoukitei's other noble lords had any sympathy with his softness regarding Kutou's tribes. Now, however, the seeds of an idea were beginning to implant themselves in the Shougun's brain.

Perhaps there would be a use for You Kanshi, after all.

He cast the flames a last glance, watching as the final fragments of evidence disappeared into ash, then he turned his back, making his way from the chamber up the cold stone steps to the Emperor's quarters. As he reached it, the guardsmen on duty saluted him sharply, and Nakago dismissed them with a flick of his fingers.

"Is my Lord Emperor within?" He asked softly, and the nearest guard nodded.

"Yes, sir. He is, sir."

"Good." Nakago smiled, his cold blue eyes glittering. "Continue your guard and notify me if any messages come from our camp on the Southern border. I wish to know the moment news arrives — do you understand?"

"Yes, sir, Shougun, sir. Right away."

Nakago nodded his acknowledgement, then pushed back the heavy divide, entering the chamber and prostrating himself on the ground before his Emperor.

"Nakago?" Shoukitei cast him a startled glance. "What brings you into my presence this afternoon, man? I don't recall having sent for you."

"My sincere apologies, Heika." Nakago schooled his words into soft,

apologetic tones. “But I sought my Lord’s advice. I have not yet received a full report on our troops in the Southern Province, and I am concerned by this lack of contact. I wondered, what would my Emperor have me do?”

“The Southern…?” Shoukitei’s beady eyes widened. “You mean the men deployed there to antagonise the border villages in that blasted pretty boy’s country?”

“Yes, my Lord.” Nakago raised his gaze to his King’s. “I expected word from the camp twenty-four hours ago, yet I have had nothing. I am worried… that perhaps… their progress has been anticipated and even stopped by the Emperor of the South and his forces.”

“Those damned commanders — what are they doing?” Shoukitei’s fat fists clenched in anger. “I knew I should have sent you there in person to deal with things… but I thought that they could handle a simple border raid. There are no strong military settlements in that part of Kounan, after all. And no reason for them to know we were coming.”

“Unless they had somehow been forewarned, Heika.” Nakago said smoothly, and Shoukitei looked startled.

“Forewarned?” He echoed. “You mean… betrayed? I’ve been betrayed?”

“I pray not, my Lord.” Nakago said softly. “But like you, I do not understand how our forces could have been so easily discovered. If, indeed, that is what occured. I need your guidance in this, Heika. I do not know how to act against such a threat. Who could do such a thing? Even I cannot imagine a man who would betray his Emperor and leak information to the enemy. But as you say, there is no way for the South to anticipate our coming. If they did indeed know of it… I can’t see what else it could mean.”

Shoukitei was silent for a moment, clenching and unclenching his fists much like a spoiled child who had been deprived of a favourite toy. Then, at length, he sighed.

“The Southern Province has always been a damn nusiance.” He said darkly. “Just this morning I received another word from the noble house there that they have chosen not to act against the three or four tribal settlements still remaining untouched in that region. Now you tell me that our military manoeuvres have been thwarted, even though I had You-dono swear to me directly that he would never interfere with the movement of my army against Kounan through his land. Gin has also been complaining to me about his obstinacy and

asking that I put pressure on him to yield to my laws. Perhaps the time has come to finally do so. It is troublesome, after all… to expect my court to accept a different rule for the Southern Lord just because he sits on Saihitei's border and can cry help to their crown if he should see fit to."

"My Lord, if I may, Kounan is not a country whose military power even approaches that of our own." Nakago said respectfully. "They are too used to peace, and are unable to envisage the kind of war that men here have been trained for since they were young. My spies within the Southern borders have reported such things to me. This is why the Emperor of the South is so keen to send envoys and make peace with my Lord. He knows that, should war occur, he cannot match my Emperor's forces with the paltry guard he has at his disposal."

Shoukitei's gaze hardened, and he nodded.

"When you receive a report on the events on the Southern border, Nakago, relay it to me directly." He instructed. "In the meantime, it is high time I brought You-dono into line with his brethren. I will have him summoned before the court here and told that he either obey my orders to the letter or he will find himself in a very difficult situation. And, more to the point, if I should discover he has been at all involved in making contact with the South…"

His eyes narrowed.

"There are always other Lords who can take control of that Province, and You-dono does not have a military might to compare to some of them." He said softly. "He will soon discover that betrayal is something that I will never forgive."

"Yes, my Lord." Nakago bowed once more, then got to his feet. "Then with your permission, may I return to the barracks to await such a communication?"

"Do so." Shoukitei agreed. "At least I have one tribal man around me who sees the futility of fighting Imperial power. Do not let me down, Nakago. Remember what I have done for you."

"I would never think of anything else, Heika." Nakago responded evenly. "You need have no concerns. I will carry out your order exactly."

As he left the chamber, he ran his mind over the conversation carefully once more.

The Emperor was as foolish and gullible as ever, he reasoned. Even

though there had been no evidence to suggest that the Southern Lord had conspired in any way with Kounan's forces, Nakago knew that Shoukitei was both sensitive and paranoid enough about their movements to believe it on even the most meagre of indications. You Kanshi had, after all, resisted the slave laws for a long time, and as such was a prime candidate for the suspicion of treason.

"And should Shoukitei give her beloved brother a hard time, then it will no doubt harden the wench's resolve against her husband and the Emperor." Nakago added to himself. "Kaiga Ruiren is weak, and she looks to me for strength. But such a thing is not enough — not for one as weak of will as she is. She might buckle once more in Gin's favour, should she take fright and fear for her own life. I must have her entirely in the palm of my hand, if I am to use that connection to my own advantage. It strikes me that, if things become difficult in the Southern Province, that will be part of my job done for me. No Lord other than You-dono will be able to rule the noble clans there without the region dissolving into anarchy and chaos. That is the reason why they have been left alone for as long as they have. With the Emperor distracted by such things, I will have plenty of time to make my moves. Not only to humiliate Kaiga Gin, but more, to destroy his miserable family forever."

His eyes narrowed.

"Destroy the Kaigas and you destroy one of the Emperor's strongest supports." He added to himself. "With the Southern region in chaos and an invasion launched against Kounan, Shoukitei's backing will melt away. And then, at long last, I can achieve what I have waited so long to do. All with the help of a feeble, malleable woman."

He smiled coldly, remembering Ruiren's letter once more.

"It will not be hard to make her believe she is in love with me, when so much is happening around her." He mused softly. "To think that such a frail being might hold the key to Kutou's political destruction."

"Nakago-sama!"

As he reached the barracks, a young boy hurried forward, bowing his head before the Shougun as he struggled to catch his breath, and Nakago frowned, pursing his lips as he recognised the young man's features.

"I have been waiting for your report for more than a day, Bu Shunkaku." He said softly, a faint reproach in his voice. "Would I have done better had I sent your brother in your stead? I thought you

wanted the chance to prove yourself to me and to Kutou — was I wrong?"

"My apologies, Nakago-sama." The boy said repentantly. "I've come as quickly as I could… considering, I've come at top speed."

"Considering… what, exactly?" Nakago asked quietly, and the youngster raised his gaze, something flickering in the depths of his eyes.

"It was exactly as you said it would be, Nakago-sama." He said eagerly. "On the border, when we were encamped. Suzaku…"

"Suzaku?" Nakago raised an eyebrow. "I see. I think we should continue this discussion inside my quarters — it seems you've done better than I thought."

"Yes, sir." Shunkaku agreed, following his leader inside the imposing stone building and along the hallways to the Shougun's study. His aura was prickling with something, Nakago realised, and as they stepped inside the small room he closed the door, turning to face his companion with a pensive gaze.

"So at last you've learnt to sense out the aura of another, is that it?" He asked evenly. Shunkaku blushed, shaking his head.

"It was faint, but I'm sure it was there." He said slowly. "Nakago-sama, I'm getting stronger all the time. I will be ready, I promise. To do whatever it is you need of me for Kutou. I won't let…"

"For now, I only wish to hear your report on the Southern border." Nakago cut across him, holding up his hand in a warning. "Can you do that, do you think? I do not need your embellishments — it will be for me to decide when you have gained enough experience for me to call you other than your birth name when we meet face to face."

"Yes, Nakago-sama." The boy reddened even further, bowing his head once more. "I'm sorry."

"Then report to me, Bu Shunkaku. What happened?"

"I don't know by what magic it was achieved." Shunkaku said honestly. "Overnight all the weaponry in our camp disappeared, and the whole thing was sent into chaos. Then, in the midst of it, there was a huge explosion. Men fled in every direction, and it was all the Captains could do to reassemble them into any kind of order. With no weapons, they've been forced to withdraw back here. Only I remembered your orders, Nakago-sama. So I ran on ahead and didn't stop with the camp when it paused for the night. I've come without

stopping… I thought you should know what occured before anyone else."

"I see." Nakago looked pensive. "I wondered what kind of force Saihitei already had at his disposal. Whether or not Suzaku's people really had begun to gather, as the rumours have suggested. I am confident of the existence of people like us over the border, after all. And it seems my suspicions have been borne out. One of them was clearly present… you did not see them?"

"No, not actually." Shunkaku shook his head. "It was too great a distance. But I felt his chi, and I knew it wasn't one of us. So I was sure… it had to be… Suzaku."

"Indeed." Nakago nodded. He smiled.

"It seems you have done well." He added. "I am pleased. Having you lag so far behind your brother is inconvenient at a time when we need your strength, not your weakness."

"I am getting stronger, Nakago-sama. And I'm sure, if he came back, I'd know him again."

"Maybe, but for now, that doesn't concern me." Nakago dismissed it with a flick of his hand. "To test the waters, that's all this mission was intended to do. When the Emperor truly wishes to launch an invasion on the South, it will come with frightening force and they will be able to do nothing about it, not even with Suzaku on their side. When that time comes, I will lead the force myself — they will not have a chance to resist."

He eyed the youngster thoughtfully.

"And I'm sure, by then, you too will have reached your full usefulness." He murmured. "Suboshi."

The moon was high in the sky now.

Hou Jun gazed up at the sky over their head, taking in the clear night and the white specks that were dotted in patterns against the dark background, glittering and shimmering with a particularly strong light. He pursed his lips, casting a glance back to where the young bandit was stoking the fire, carefully ensuring that it burnt evenly and made the best use of the wood available, and despite himself, he smiled.

A short time earlier, the youngster had caught fish from one of the Shouryuu's tributaries, gutting them with his blade and cooking them

over the fire in such a way that told the sorcerer he had done it many times before. And though Hou Jun had winced slightly at the sight of the sword cutting so cleanly through the fish bellies, he had not been ungrateful for his share of the meal. Genrou's manners were rough and ready, and his accent was clearly not from the North. But beyond that was a kind, fair heart, and Hou Jun found that despite their differences, he did not dislike the bandit's company.

He was open and honest, he reflected, glancing at his hands as he remembered the disguise he had adopted before interfering in the earlier fight. Unlike his own habit of hiding behind Taiitsukun's mask and his spells, the youngster was exactly as he seemed, and inwardly Hou Jun felt a little guilty for not having been as truthful about his identity and his motives.

"Forgive me, Genrou, for deceiving you so much tonight." He mused to himself, returning his gaze to the sky. "But until I meet Suzaku no Miko, I don't intend on telling you who I really am. I saved you because one day we'll meet again, and that day you'll need to have all your wits about you. For now, though, this is enough. One of Suzaku's people is in the North, just as I thought. Which means that, with the three at the palace, and myself, that's five of us healthy and strong. So much to the good — Taiitsukun did say that Suzaku no Miko's return would be sooner than I thought."

"Yo, Hou Jun-san."

At this moment, Genrou glanced up, gesturing for the sorcerer to join him. "What you starin' at? The sky's always the same, you know. Just stars an' shit. We're not travellin' anywhere, so there's no point in studyin' it so much as all that. You said you were goin' to teach me somethin' — what did you mean?"

"I suppose I did say that, didn't I?" Hou Jun nodded, coming to rejoin his companion at the campfire. "You're right — and I should keep my word. But it's late already. Are you sure you're not tired? You must have travelled far to get here, after all — I may be wrong, but your accent sounds more like it's from Souun than Souen. Am I right?"

"Souen…?" Genrou's brow creased, then he shrugged. "Beats me if I know what or where that is. But yeah, my family live near Souun, in the South West province. Why?"

"No reason." Hou Jun grinned. "Your accent is distinctive, that's all. I've visited your locality once or twice on my travels, and I've heard people thereabouts speak in the same way."

"Hmm." Genrou flopped back on the ground, slipping his hands

behind his head. “I ain’t never been so far from there before, t’be truthful. It feels wrong, bein’ here. Like I’ve walked into alien country. I don’t get the North. I don’t know where I’m goin’ or what people to ask for what help. But I can’t give up an’ go back, yet. So I’m a fish outta water, I guess. Bein’ up here like this.”

“There are a lot of differences between the North and the South-West.” Hou Jun agreed. “I was born in this area, so maybe I can be of help to you in some way. Where are you trying to reach, Genrou-san? I might know a quicker route than for you to wander through the forestland for days on end.”

“For real?” Genrou’s eyes lit up with hope. “You’re really from these parts, Hou Jun-san?”

“Yes. Why are you so surprised?”

Genrou reddened.

“Well… it’s just… you’re dressed up like that.” He said falteringly, embarrassment clear in his gaze. “An, well, people in the North seem to be a shitload richer an’ dress up like… well…”

He trailed off, looking uncomfortable, and Hou Jun chuckled.

“I see.” He said lightly. “Well, my trade means that I don’t take much interest in my appearance or my apparel. I travel a lot, after all, and there’s no sense in being a target for thieves when you travel alone. Noone bothers me, in this guise. Besides, not everyone in the North is rich, Genrou-san. There are poor people here, too.”

“Not like in the South-West, I’m guessing.” Genrou said darkly, and Hou Jun shrugged.

“I don’t know.” He said honestly. “Though I was recently in Kusouken, and the people there seem to be in an even sorrier state.”

He sighed, shrugging his hands.

“There’s not much a feeble soul like me can do if it comes to war between Kutou and Kounan.” He added, casting his companion a sidelong glance as he did so. “After all, I’ve never held a sword in my life and wouldn’t know how to begin now. But it could come, you know. I’ve heard a lot of rumours, in that part of Kounan, that Kutou’s forces have been massing near the border.”

“That’s the Emperor’s problem. Not yours or mine.” Genrou said frankly. “I ain’t worrying about Kutou invadin’.”

Hou Jun’s eyes narrowed, realising that for the first time since they

had begun talking, Genrou was not being entirely honest with him. He pursed his lips, making up his mind.

“Genrou-san, you can navigate by the stars, you said?” He asked softly, and Genrou looked startled, nodding his head.

“Sure. What of it? Don’t you do it too?”

“Of course.” Hou Jun smiled. “The stars are friends to me, because they’re often there as my companions when I travel. It’s been like that for a long time — I like the stars very much. Sometimes they’re the best ones to talk to, after all, when there’s a lot on your mind.”

Genrou raised an eyebrow, and Hou Jun laughed.

“You truly do think I’m odd, don’t you?” He realised, and Genrou shrugged.

“Give me a good reason why I shouldn’t?” He challenged. “You do weird-ass magic, an’ you talk to stars. But… I guess it don’t matter to me. You’re weird, but you ain’t twisted up like that bastard who jumped me or the one who tried to rape my sister. So it’s fine. I don’t get it, but if it makes you happy, whatever.”

“Rape your…” Hou Jun’s eyes widened, and Genrou cursed.

“Shit. I ain’t supposed t’be talking about any of that.” He muttered, and Hou Jun’s gaze softened.

“I see.” He said gently. “Your family was hurt by those people, and now they’re wanting to hurt you, too. And you feel it’s your fault, because you have Tasuki’s mark, even though you don’t want it. Am I right?”

Genrou scrambled up into a sitting position, staring at Hou Jun in surprise, and the sorcerer knew he had hit the nail on the head. He nodded.

“Suzaku gave you strength.” He said softly. “But with that strength comes burdens and difficulties. Few people can understand what that means. It’s not about being powerful… it’s about sacrifices. And whether or not someone is strong enough to face up to those things and accept them.”

“I don’t want to be Tasuki.” Genrou said blackly. “I ain’t never wanted it. I belong on Reikaku-zan an’ I gave my word I’d go back there, when I’d finished my business here. I’m part of that family, an’ it’s where I want to be. Kashira’s sick, an’ I came here to find a cure, since people kept sayin’ that there was someone in the North who could heal shit like Hakurou-sama’s got. But I ain’t found him. An’

people keep huntin' me down because of somethin' that I never even chose to be."

"Do you know which stars belong to Tasuki, Genrou-san?"

"Yeah, though it ain't important to me." Genrou frowned. "You can't talk me into turnin' into one of Suzaku's people, you know. If that's what you want to do…"

"It's not up to me to do that." Hou Jun shook his head. "It's not my decision. Only you can decide what you do with your life, after all. It's just that, either way, you ought to understand what it means. Even if you aren't going to become Tasuki and fight with Suzaku no Miko, you have a strength and you should still use it. Even if you're only using it to protect the people you care about, in the South-West and on that Reikaku-zan mountain you mentioned. Don't you think that you owe it to them to understand how Tasuki can help them be stronger? If an invasion comes, after all, they might need you more than you think."

Genrou's eyes widened, and Hou Jun could tell he was thinking this over carefully.

"You may be weird, but you're kinda smart, too." he acknowledged. "I hadn't really thought of it like that. Seems all it does is make me a target. People are tryin' to kill me, an' I don't need that anywhere near my family. Not now, not ever. That's all. That's why I ain't showin' it to anyone. I can't protect people if I'm always bein' made a target."

"That depends, I suppose, on how strong you can be."

Hou Jun said seriously, slipping his hand into the sash of his priest's robe and pulling out a handful of small parchment strips, setting them down on the ground.

"Whether you believe it or not, Genrou-san, you have a lot of strength inside of you. Strength you haven't fully awakened yet, I'm sure of that." He continued. "I'm a sorcerer, so I can sense those things. Your life force burns brightly, and that's both a good thing and a bad one. It's good, because it means your capacity to fight forward and live is higher than most people's. You have skills you take for granted that most people will never be able to attain. However…"

"However?" Genrou looked suspicious, reaching over to scoop up one of the pieces of parchment. "What is this — are you goin' to give me a writing lesson or something? Because I'm not illiterate, you know. I might be a bandit, but I ain't friggin' stupid."

"Far from it." Hou Jun shook his head. "I was simply going to say

that your weakness is in how easy it is to find you. Your enemies can track you because you give out such a strong aura. If they have even a little skill in detecting chi, they will be able to pin you down. If you want to be more discreet about your identity, you'll need to learn how to manage that aura into something you can better control. Otherwise, Tasuki or not, you'll always be a target."

"How the hell am I meant to do that?"

"I can't tell you the answer to that." Hou Jun shrugged. "Every person is different. You'll have to find your own way. In the meantime…"

He patted the parchment.

"I'll give you something to help you deter those who want to attack you."

"Bits of paper?" Genrou looked sceptical. "I don't understand. What the hell use are they?"

"They're not bits of paper, you know. They're *o-fuda*." Hou Jun said calmly. "Or they will be, before we're done."

"O-what now?"

"Let me show you. I think it might be quicker than trying to explain." Hou Jun eyed him for a moment, then he smiled. "You call yourself Genrou. 'Rou' is wolf, without a doubt. Am I right in thinking that 'Gen' is illusion? That the characters you use are '*maboroshii*' and '*ookami*'?"

"What of it?" Genrou looked confused. "Kashira gave me that nickname when I joined the mountain. He said I was like a phantom wolf, because I was fast an' because I was tenacious. So it stuck. What about it?"

"Then it seems fitting, doesn't it, for you to fight with wolves."

Hou Jun carefully scribed the two characters on one of the scraps of parchment, closing his eyes briefly as a faint haze of light glittered around them. "Watch me carefully, Genrou-san. If you can learn how to do this, it will definitely be your secret weapon — something others won't be expecting."

"All right, already, I'm watching." Genrou frowned. "What am I supposed to be seeing?"

Hou Jun opened his eyes, casting his companion a mischievous smile. Then he released the parchment, tossing it across the clearing.

"*Genjutsu Shuntarou*." He murmured, and Genrou's eyes opened wide as the slip of paper shimmered and transformed before his eyes into the glittering, ghostly form of a wolf, snapping and snarling on the grass before him.

"What the hell?" He whispered, and Hou Jun clapped his hands together as the illusion faded and the scrap of paper fell once more to the ground.

"It's an illusion spell." He explained. "*Genjutsu* means that exact thing, after all. What you write on the paper becomes real when you cast the spell and release your grasp on it. It's quite simple magic, really. But effective. Though it is illusiory, the wolf you just saw has the potential to attack with the same physical presence as a real wolf would, only one under your command. When the *o-fuda* is destroyed, then so is the illusion. But until that point, the creature appears as real as you or I."

He shrugged.

"You can write anything on the parchment with the same effect." He added. "This parchment is part of my own collection, so it's already primed for that kind of spell to be cast over it. With an aura like yours, Genrou-san, it shouldn't be too hard for you to replicate and control the illusion for your own ends."

"For real?" Genrou looked startled. "I could do that? Really? Even though I ain't a sorcerer?"

"You have Suzaku's blood, whether you want it or not." Hou Jun said sensibly. "You must know that that makes you different from other people."

The bandit's eyes widened, and Hou Jun nodded.

"You already know what I mean, don't you?" He murmured. "You've seen it happen already, haven't you?"

"The tessen…" Genrou breathed. "I fired it… I fired the tessen without the whole of the spell. I shouldn't've been able to do that. But I did it. Shit… is that what you mean?"

"Tessen…?" Hou Jun looked blank, and Genrou shrugged.

"It's a harisen with a charm over it to shoot fire." He explained glibly. "It's only s'posed to work if you know the whole spell, an' I don't, even now. But… I still made it shoot fire. Is that why? Because… of Suzaku?"

"I imagine so." Hou Jun nodded his head, his curiosity piqued. "In

which case, teaching you this is an even better idea. If you've already managed to use some spiritual power just by acting on instinct, you should have no trouble mastering this. And I'm sure it'll come in handy, if you really want to protect the people you're close to."

"I guess I do." Genrou agreed. "Not as Tasuki, though. Hell, no. I'm Genrou. That's enough, ain't it?"

"For now, if that's what you're happy being, then it's enough." Hou Jun agreed. "But you do have Tasuki's mark. And that fact alone gives you enough spiritual power to complete the spell effectively. That being the case, you should exploit that fact for all it's worth."

He shrugged.

"Try." He suggested. "Write 'wolf' on the paper, and see what happens when you cast the spell."

"It won't attack me?" Genrou hesitated, and Hou Jun shook his head.

"It won't." He agreed. "The spell is under your control. The illusions are at your command, because they're an extension of your will. Essentially, they come from inside of you."

"I don't pretend I understood that, but whatever you say." Genrou hesitated, then did as he was bidden, scrawling the second character from his name in messy script on the paper. "Right. Okay. Now what was it you mumbled again? Gen… something…?"

"*Genjutsu Shuntarou*." Hou Jun responded.

"*Gen… jutsu… Shun..tarou*?"

"Yes. But faster than that. In one breath, if you can."

"Give me a chance! I never heard it before, an' it's not like it means anything in particular!" Genrou snapped. "All right. Fine. What else did you do? You made it glow… what was that?"

"Focus your thoughts on the *o-fuda*, and that should be enough to activate it." Hou Jun said simply. "And repeat the words as you let it loose. You don't have to shout them, but you need to say them clearly. Then the spell will be cast."

"All right. Here goes nothing, then."

Genrou closed his eyes, tossing the slip of parchment across the forest floor.

"*Genjutsu… Shuntarou*!"

As the paper left his fingers, it shimmered and transformed, and a smile began to spread across Hou Jun's lips.

"Well, well." He murmured. "You're really a very good student, Genrou-kun. Or I'm an outstanding teacher, one or the other."

"Did I do it?" Genrou's eyes snapped open, letting out a whoop of triumph as he saw the wolf that had materialised on the grass before him. "Shit, I really did!"

"You did." Hou Jun scooped up the spare parchment, holding it out. "And so I'll give you these. Use them sensibly, but use them when you need to. They are a weapon, after all, but they're also a way of distracting and confusing your enemy. Killing isn't always the answer. Sometimes fooling them is just as effective."

"I guess." Genrou took the parchment, glancing at it then sliding it into his jacket. "But why are you just giving me this stuff? Who are you really, Hou Jun-san? Why do you want to help me at all?"

Hou Jun was silent for a moment, then he shook his head.

"Right now I can't explain that in a way you'll understand." He said honestly, shrugging his shoulders. "One day, you will understand it. Maybe then I'll be able to explain it to you myself, though I can't guarantee when we might meet again. For now, just take it as a gift of good luck. Whatever path you choose, it will be a path full of challenges, after all. Life is like that, you know. Especially when you're born different. I suppose I want you to utilise that difference so that one day we *will* cross paths a second time."

He smiled, getting to his feet as he dispersed the illusiory wolf with a flick of his fingers.

"Your enemy will return." He added. "I moved him, but I didn't kill him, after all. And he knows who you are now, so he will come after you again. Be ready for him, Genrou-san."

"Wait… where are you going?" Genrou looked startled, and Hou Jun's smile widened.

"I have a few of my own errands to run." He said vaguely. "I'm grateful for your company tonight, Genrou-san — and for the eager way in which you've taken my advice and my magic. Not everyone is willing to accept someone who casts spells as easily as breathing in and out. But you're possessed of a good heart, and that is your greatest strength. Don't lose that, no matter what else happens. And I'm sure, one day, we'll meet again."

Before the bandit could react, he brought his hands up in front of his face, disappearing into the darkness of one of his spells. As he re-emerged back at the site of his village's destruction, he relaxed his disguise, letting out a heavy sigh as he sank down onto the ground.

"I still have trouble using magic and keeping my disguise in place." He reflected aloud. "And coming here is still the easiest, even if it is the most painful. Any longer in Genrou's company and I would have revealed my true form… still, I think I was with him long enough to make a difference."

He narrowed his gaze, remembering the encounter with the assassin.

"Sent by Kutou's Shougun, no doubt." He muttered. "But now I've evened the score, I'm sure that young lad will be all right. I don't think I ever met anyone with such spirit to live before, after all. He won't be easily killed — I'm sure of that."

He smiled, gazing up at the sky.

"I rather liked being in his company." He realised. "When Suzaku no Miko returns, I think I'll be glad to renew our acquaintance, Reikaku-zan no Genrou-san."

Chapter 15

Chapter Fourteen

As ever, Eiyou was full of people looking for work.

Tamahome sank down onto a nearby stretch of crumbling wall, letting out a heavy sigh as he took a moment to catch his breath. It was late in the afternoon, yet he had been there since dawn struggling to find something through which he could earn some coins to take home to his family's village. His father's thin face and his siblings' eager expressions haunted his thoughts and he groaned, burying his head in his hands.

So it wasn't going to be so easy as all that, then.

"Dammit, Miaka. Where are you when I need to market you?"

He raised his gaze to the sky, inwardly cursing the absent Miko for being so long away from Kounan. Though he knew that his reasons for missing her were more complex than just the opportunity to exploit her before the Eiyou marketplace, at that moment he could not see an easy solution to his problem.

It had been naive, after all, to come to the capital in search of work.

Still, at least he still had his life.

His fingers brushed absently against the arm which had taken injury in the forest a few days earlier, touching the edge of the wound which was now healing. He had managed to lose his pursuer somewhere in the dense forest that had separated his village from the capital and, though Hotohori had been concerned by his report, the palace physician had confirmed that the injury was no more than a graze and that the blade had not been laced with poison. It had stung a little, as the medic had cleaned and bound it, but now it was well on the way to mending, and would probably not even leave a scar.

His gamble had paid off then, and so far as he knew, his family were safe from attack. Yet still it weighed on his mind — that as eldest son, he was not doing his duty to the people back home.

He got to his feet, forcing the negative thoughts out of his mind as he resolutely set off to begin all over again. The nature of the job wasn't important, and until Miaka returned, it wasn't as though he had anything else to fill his hours. Surely, if he kept going, he'd find

something, somewhere?

Even if there was a war brewing on the horizon, and even if Kounan's economy was more shaky than it had been in long time.

As he passed the scribe's quarter, he had to dart out of the way of a horse-drawn carriage and he let out an exclamation, pushing his body back against the wall as the contraption drew to a hurried stop outside one of the city's biggest parchment emporia. Though it had been his fault, the door of the wagon opened and a tall, well dressed young man stepped down to the ground, casting him a concerned look.

"Are you hurt?" He asked anxiously, and Tamahome stared at him, not comprehending. Slowly he shook his head.

"You should be more careful." The driver of the carriage said sharply. "Running around like that only gets people killed an' you're old enough t'know better."

He cast the young man a glance.

"It's all right, Master Gishou. I stopped in time. There's always some fool thinking they can dodge the hooves, and I've quick wits about me."

"Ani-ja? Ani-ja, is the gentleman all right?"

A higher pitched voice from within the carriage alerted Tamahome to the fact a child had also been travelling, and he felt guilty all over again, knowing that if he had been hit, it could well have turned over the carriage and harmed the passengers inside.

He bowed his head low before the young man named Gishou, apology in his violet gaze.

"I'm sorry, I wasn't looking where I was going." He said honestly, and Gishou smiled.

"Who is, in this crazy city?" He asked lightly. "It's all right. Noone's hurt."

A small face appeared at the window at that juncture, taking in Tamahome's dusty form for a moment, and Tamahome stared at him, trying to work out the boy's age. Seven, maybe, or eight? Somewhere around the age of one of his younger siblings, in any case, yet dressed in attire which marked him out as someone with more means than his family would hope to make in a year.

For a moment the two, Seishi and boy met gazes. Then a strange look crossed the child's features.

“Oni-shounen.” He murmured, and at the sound of his recent appelation, Tamahome’s eyes widened in alarm.

“What did…”

The child smiled, and for an instant Tamahome felt like he was meeting the gaze of an adult, for the youngster’s eyes were boring into him, scrutinising every feature on his face as though committing it to memory. Despite himself, Tamahome felt uneasy, the memory of the recent forest attack still fresh in his mind, and he took a step back from the carriage.

“I… shouldn’t hold you up. Sorry to cause you such a bother.” He said hastily. “I’ll be more careful in future.”

The boy did not respond, nor did he shift his gaze, but his faint smile widened into more of a grin, and again Tamahome felt that he was speaking to someone much older than he seemed.

“Doukun, you might as well get out here. You wanted to get some more writing paper for your exams, didn’t you?”

At that moment the older brother spoke, and the strange impression vanished as the child let out a yelp, his eyes widening in surprise.

“Paper? Did I say that? I don’t remember!”

There was a faint whine to his tone, and Gishou laughed, reaching up to pull the carriage door open once more.

“Come on. I’ll help you down. You’ll remember when you get inside, I’m sure. Come on, quickly. We need to be back in Jouzen before dark, or Mother will worry.”

“We’re not going to spend the whole night in Eiyou! Ani-ja!” The child looked horrified, and Gishou shook his head, grasping the tiny fists in his as he hauled the youngster down to the gound.

“I gave her my word, so there’s no way.” He said firmly. “I have work to see to in the morning, after all. If it wasn’t for your exams, we wouldn’t be here now.”

“My exams.” The child echoed, in a voice which was half a whisper and half a sigh. “I know.”

He turned to glance at Tamahome again, offering him a guileless, innocent smile that held none of the meaning of his earlier gaze.

“I’m glad you weren’t hurt, oniisan.” He said sincerely.

Tamahome stared at him for a moment, then bowed his head.

“Sorry for bein’ a bother again.” He said quietly, then, before he could be asked any more questions, he took a step or two back towards the entrance to a side-street, darting into the alleyway and out towards the textile quarter.

Once there he let out his breath in a rush, struggling to make sense of what had happened. His fingers went absently to his brow, as though somehow he could tell by touch whether his character was showing, yet he knew deep down inside that it was not. He had not manifested the red mark of Suzaku, yet somehow that child — had it even been a child? — had stared at him and known.

Were those people more spies for Kutou’s Emperor? He did not know, but the very thought made him uneasy.

“Too many people know that I exist, and it’s only going to cause more trouble at this rate.” He reflected sadly. “There’s no way anyone in Eiyou is going to employ the oni-shounen, if rumours stay as rife as this. I’m going to have to bite the bullet and leave Eiyou, aren’t I? For the sake of my family — I’m going to have to find a job somewhere where they don’t know anything about Suzaku or the mark that burns on my brow.”

How much further did this river go on for, anyhow?

Genrou paused at the clearing to a forest copse, leaning up against the trunk of a tree as he caught his breath. Since dawn, he had been walking in the direction that the sorcerer had casually indicated, and though he knew that he had been following the right path, at every twist and turn he had found himself coming up against the banks of a fast-flowing, meandering river. Choukou, he knew, was on the other side… yet to this point he had not found a bridge or adequate means of crossing the wide-set stretch of water.

In fact, he reflected ruefully, he had only found the destroyed remains of a few, which indicated to him that this river was prone to flooding.

His mind flitted back to his conversation with the sorcerer. The man had been odd, yes, and unlike anyone Genrou had ever met before. Yet somehow he had also seemed someone in whose word he could trust, and Genrou had not doubted any of the things he had said. The magic trick that he had been taught still lingered in this thoughts — no doubt he would have to use it at some point, if he was going to properly defend his family and his Kashira from the oncoming threat of war.

The Sorcerer had known who he was, yet he had seemed to understand that the things important to Genrou were not his country but his people back home. And for that end, he had given him the o-fuda.

Despite himself Genrou smiled, a wolfish fang protruding from his lips as he reflected on it.

“People in the North Country sure seem a lot more helpful than some of them in the mountains.” He decided at length. “Even if I never see that old dude again — I owe him one for sure.”

“I really didn’t think you would be fool enough to step out of shelter by the light of day, Suzaku no Tasuki-san.”

The voice struck through his senses, and Genrou stiffened, spinning around as he sought to locate the speaker. At his actions, there was a laugh, and then, a sudden whoosh of dark fabric as something descended from the trees above his head.

“I’ve been following you, boy.” The man said mockingly. “Yet you seem to be such a fool that you haven’t been aware of me. Is this the level of Suzaku’s people, then? Idiotic farming boys who can’t even tell when they’re being pursued?”

“It doesn’t matter t’me if you were following me or if you weren’t.” Genrou shot back, his fingers going for the hilt of his sword. “Last night you might’ve thought you had the better of me, but that was just luck. I don’t need t’know if you’re about, because I ain’t scared of you an’ I ain’t about to let you kill me. All that happens by you followin’ me is that you get killed. That’s all.”

“Cocky language for one who had to be rescued at blade-point.” The assassin said derisively. “Speaking of which, where is your sorcerer friend now? Or has he abandoned you after all?”

“He’s not my friend… he’s nothing to do with me.” Genrou said frankly. “Just a guy I met, that’s all, while travelling through the forest. He ain’t nothing to do with you, either — so you can leave him alone, okay? Even if you think I have some connection to Suzaku — that guy’s just a dude from the North who can do spells an’ shit. Nothin’ else.”

“A bare acquaintance yet you seek to protect him?” The assassin looked thoughtful. “I see. You have interesting values, boy, for one so young and unprepared.”

With a fleeting, fluid movement, he drew his sword from it’s sheath, launching himself at Genrou who cursed, only just managing

to pull his own blade to defend himself. The two swords clattered together with a loud clang, sending birds screaming into the skies over their heads, and Genrou's eyes narrowed as he saw the pure, black hatred in his opponent's eyes.

"Who really did send you to kill me?" He demanded, pushing the dark-clad man away from him as he readied his stance for the next charge. "An' why? Because of the mark on my arm? Are your bosses really that shit-scared of it, that they have t'send an idiot like you out to slit my throat?"

"None of that is any of your business." The assassin said coldly. "Avenging my dead comrade is reason enough for you."

"Your comrade tried to rape my sister, so he got punished." Genrou shot back. "Or don't they teach that in creepy assassin camp — that if you piss off a south-western farmin' family, an' you try an' take the honour of one of their daughters, there'll be hell to pay when the menfolk get involved."

"Strangely I don't spend much time in that sort of society." The assassin said witheringly. "For the time being, however, his death hasn't been in vain. You are Tasuki, whether you admit it or not. My order is to hunt down and kill the people of Suzaku. My reasons are none of your business. You'll die, after all. A dead man doesn't need explanations."

"Then I ain't got a reason to give you any, either!" Genrou exclaimed, darting forward and launching his weapon once more at the assassin. A frantic, frenetic battle of blades followed, with Genrou and the assassin matching one another blow for blow. The man was older than him, but just as fast and lithe as he had been the time before, and Genrou found that he needed his speed and his wits to stay ahead of the battle.

Yet this time he knew it was a fight he could not lose. If he was to let the man escape a second time, it was possible that his family back in the Eastern Village would be the next victims. And that was not an eventuality he was willing to entertain.

He didn't really want to kill someone else, but somehow he knew that he had little choice. This was a fight to the death, and he had to ensure that the death would not be his.

As this resolve hardened inside of him, he felt something warm and strong flood through his already tired body, giving him new strength and drive as he launched himself at the assassin anew. Adrenalin pumped through his veins and for the briefest of instants he thought

he saw the trailing tail feathers of a brimstone bird swing across the corner of his vision. Confused, he faltered for a brief instant, and the assassin let out a yell of triumph as he swung his blade, seeking to exploit Genrou's opening. But Genrou knew he was not going to be beaten this time. With his body still tingling and burning with the unexpected rush of energy, he met the assassin's blade with his own, forcing the man off his feet and pressing his boot down hard on his pursuer's chest. The man struggled, but Genrou knew that he wasn't going to escape. Not this time. This time it was over.

"Now you can tell me who sent you." He said quietly, glaring at his enemy through indignant bronze eyes. "And whether or not any more of your buddies are around."

"So long as you live, Suzaku no Tasuki, my comrades will keep on coming. Even if you think you destroyed the danger by defeating me — I am only one of many."

The assassin gazed at him malevolently, then, very pointedly, he poked out his tongue between his teeth, biting down hard as blood spurted from the wound. An instant too late Genrou realised what his companion had done and he let out a curse, stepping back from the body even as the man's skin began to pale from the pooling red liquid at his side.

A suicidal bite, symbolic of the man's intent to die rather than speak his secrets.

Genrou shut his eyes for a moment, composing himself. In part, he was relieved — he had not had to cut the enemy's throat and so he knew that his family would have no further reason to be angry with him. Yet he was also troubled by the man's final words.

"One of many." He murmured, gazing up at the trees as if expecting to see black-clad men emerging from every conceivable shadow. "And all because of me. All because… of this."

He rolled back the sleeve of his jacket, glaring with loathing at the red 'tsubasa' mark that was glittering and shining on his right limb.

"I never wanted anythin' to do with Suzaku." He muttered. "So why's it got to be me that has to deal with all of this stuff? No matter how many of these guys I face an' kill, in the end it's all the same, ain't it? There are always more of them. Wanting Suzaku's people. Wantin'…wantin' me."

His brows knitted together.

"The sooner I find what I'm lookin' for in the North, the better." He

decided. “Kashira’s vulnerable while he’s sick, an’ I’m not there to help out. If people are goin’ to attack, they’re goin’ to come lookin’ for me down there again. An’ I need to be there to fight against it… because noone else is goin’ to be able to do it for me. I won’t have people hurt because of me… so that’s what I’ll have t’do. I need to find this Choukou place, an’ fast.”

He paused, kneeling for a moment beside the cooling body of the assassin, his bandit’s magpie instinct immediately driving him to check for any sign of treasure. As he did so, he caught sight of the glitter of silver and blue on the man’s finger, and he frowned, carefully lifting the arm to examine it more closely.

It was a ring, simply set and branded simply with the outline of a dragon’s head in blue on a silver background. Genrou had seen enough traders and workers in his time on Reikaku-zan to realise that it was a sign of his employment to a higher power — yet what that higher power might be had him at a loss.

“I don’t know any trade or merchant who uses a dragon.” He reflected, sliding the ring from the man’s finger and pocketing it all the same. “But either way, I might be able to trade it for food or information, so I’ll take it with me. My secret died with him, after all — for the time bein’, I’ve a little space.”

He got to his feet, turning back towards the racing river as he plotted his course forwards.

He had no other option now. For Hakurou’s sake, he had to reach Choukou. And then, once he had gathered what he needed… it would be time to go home.

So now he had encountered four of his future brethren.

Hou Jun settled himself in the branches of his chosen tree, pondering on all he had learnt so far. From the Emperor Saihitei, to a hot-headed bandit from the South-Western mountains, Suzaku had certainly varied his choice of souls. And there were still two more he had yet to encounter.

Still, another thing concerned Hou Jun now. The air had changed, he reflected, gazing up at the cloud-specked sky as he interpreted the sensations on the morning wind. The Miko would return soon, and when she did, war would undoubtedly begin between Kutou and Kounan. He alone of his Seishi had seen things from the other side of the border… he alone had understood the full danger that a man such as Nakago posed to the quiet, unsuspecting Southern country, and

despite himself it filled him with dread.

“People will die, no matter what we do.” He murmured, drumming his fingers on the branch beside him. “The only question is how many, and whether, in the end, we can win.”

Taiitsukun’s words twitched across his senses and he smiled ruefully.

“The only sorcerer.” He muttered. “Which means that a lot is going to be left up to me. I wonder if I’m really up to it… after all my training, if I can really be Suzaku’s Chichiri and make a difference.”

Well, either way, it was too late now for both doubts and remonstrations. The war was coming, whether he liked it or not. To avoid the Miko would be to condemn his land to suffering they had not seen for many years, and even despite his hesitations, Hou Jun knew that was not a risk he was willing to take.

But for the time being, the Miko was not here. And though he knew that she would be again, for now, his duty was to protect Kounan’s people in whatever way he himself could.

He closed his eyes, bringing his hand up before his face as he cast the spell to transfer him across the landscape to the border province of Kusou. All the training he had received as a boy had taught him that in a conflict situation, the ones who suffered the worst were always the border villages, and the ones with little resources or money to get them through.

Kusou-ken fit into both of those categories, so for the time being, it would be here he’d remain.

“Suzaku no Miko, I’ll no doubt meet you soon.” He muttered. “But for now, if I can help the people here to stay safe and keep their lives… for now, that’s what I’ll do.”

Chapter 16

Chapter Fifteen

The cave was dry and dusty, concealed beneath overgrown brambles and tangled vines, yet as Genrou eased his lithe body in through the small remaining space, he found himself thanking his lucky stars for having found such a well hidden shelter.

He had spent the majority of the day walking, after his conflict with the assassin, and eventually had found a bridge still standing which could take him across the river. Locals in the town he had encountered there had told him it was called 'Shouryuu', rising dragon river, and Genrou had been struck by this, remembering the dragon-carved ring that he had taken from his blackclad enemy. As he had scraped together his coins for food, the townsfolk had also told him that the river had flooded again more recently, and that a village across the border in Kutou had apparently been badly hit. Genrou was not particularly concerned with the fate of villagers in a foreign land, however he remembered the destroyed bridge foundations that he had seen on his long trek, and he knew that this was not a river that could be easily trusted.

He had resolved therefore to spend that night somewhere well away from its reach, just in case it decided to break its banks again.

His long and meandering walk had taken him some way north of his destination, and so he had been forced to accept that he would not reach Choukou until the morrow. He was tired in any case, now, he reflected, dropping down with a sigh against the cool cave wall as he rummaged among his belongings for the sheets of parchment that the sorcerer had given him. For a moment he looked at them, remembering the easy camaraderie he had shared wth the odd man for those few hours. A faint smile touched his lips.

"I hope the people in Choukou are as helpful as everyone else has been." He mused. "The folk in that town — whatever it was called — they said that there was a physician in Choukou who had a reputation of bein; able to cure anything. Even the disease that sounds a shitload like the Kashira's. So if I find him, surely he'll help me. He's a doctor, after all… somehow I'll convince him."

He slid the parchment back into his belt, stretching out on the hard floor and folding his hands behind his head as he gazed up at the cave

roof. It was uneven and cracked in places, he noted, but stable enough for him to pass a night's sleep without it falling in on him. It had once, probably been an animal's shelter, but Genrou's keen senses had already adjudged it abandoned, and so he closed his eyes, forcing himself to relax.

It would be a busy day on the morrow, after all. He would need all his skill and strength to persuade this stranger doctor to help him cure his friend.

Genrou did not know how long he drowsed for in that cave or what exactly it was that woke him from his sleep. As his dreams drifted away from him, he sat up, his senses prickling as he gazed all around him, having the distinct sensation that he was being watched.

Had another of the assassin's comrades found him? For a moment fear ruled him, as he scrabbled around for the hilt of his sword. He was unprepared and half asleep — had they caught him unawares? Was there only one of them, or, as before, had they travelled in pairs and was he about to face a double-pronged attack from people that, for the time being, he wasn't even able to see?

He took a deep breath, steadying himself as he tightened his grasp on his weapon.

"Come out!" He exclaimed, his voice echoing against the cold hard stone. "Come out where I can see you — I know you're there!"

"As hotheaded as ever, Genrou."

The voice startled him, and his eyes opened wide with disbelief and confusion as he scanned his surroundings for any sign of the speaker. "Didn't I teach you that giving yourself away in a hidden location only invites more trouble?"

"K… K… Kashira?" Genrou could not believe his ears, his voice stammering and stumbling as he struggled to his feet. "But… you're in the mountains. You're in Reikaku-zan. I… I went to get you a cure…"

From the recesses of the cave, a tall, familiar figure emerged, shadowed and clad in familiar bandit clothing as he gazed at his protegee with a mixture of fondness and resignation.

"Yes, I know." He said softly, his words seeming to resonate all the more in the confined environment. "You look startled, Genrou. Put the sword down, huh, and listen to me for a moment? It wasn't easy to find you — but in the end, I think Suzaku showed me the way."

"Su… zaku?" Genrou obediently returned his weapon to its sheath,

staring at his leader in confusion. “But… Hakurou-kashira… what are you… how? Did you hear about the doctor in Choukou too? Is that why you followed me? Have you… are you feeling better?”

The bandit leader gazed at him for a moment, then, slowly, he shook his head.

“I came here to give you a message, that’s all.” He said softly, and Genrou saw the flicker of sadness cross his boss’s gaze. “Go home, Genrou. That’s where you’re needed most. The mountain. The men there are confused an’ they don’t know what to do. They need you now. More than they have before.”

“But… Kashira, I…”

“You went to help me. I know.” The bandit leader reached out a pale hand, resting it gently on Genrou’s shoulder, and as the man’s fingers brushed Genrou’s aura, a jolt of something shot through the youngster’s heart. He stared at his companion in alarm, seeing for the first time the true pallor of the man’s features and — even more horrifying — the curve of the cave wall through the man’s familiar clothing.

“K… Kashira?”

“Yes.” Hakurou nodded his head, as if in confirmation of Genrou’s racing thoughts. “You get it, right? There ain’t anythin’ that can be done for me, now. I told you before you left, didn’t I? That I wasn’t goin’ to be Kashira much longer. S’why I put you an’ Kouji through so many paces. S’why I made it clear who the tessen would belong to, when I was gone. You have Suzaku’s mark on your arm, Genrou, but you gave me your word that Reikaku-zan’d always be your first priority. Will you return there, now? They need you, after all. There’s noone else for them to rely on.”

Genrou bit his lip, taking in the faint blurring that surrounded his leader’s form, and despite himself tears of frustration and grief pricked at his bronze eyes.

“Why?” He whispered. “I worked so hard… I was almost there! Why did you give up so easily, Kashira? I could’ve found a cure… dammit, you weren’t supposed to die! You weren’t supposed to…”

“Stop it.” Hakurou shook his head. “I didn’t come here to see you lose your wits, after all. I came because Reikaku-zan needs its Kashira. My time’s finished, now. I’ll move on. It’s your time. Your tessen. You understand? Go home. The men need you.”

“But…” Genrou faltered, struggling to understand, and the

apparition smiled.

“You tried your hardest, just like you always do.” He said lightly. “To be honest, I didn’t know if you would see me. It was my last gamble, Genrou — that Suzaku’s spirit running through you would somehow help me to reach you. I guess it has, one way or another.”

“I’m not Suzaku’s!” Genrou said firmly. “I promised you, didn’t I? I promised you — I’m Reikaku-zan’s till I die! No matter what stupid girl comes from another world — I belong on the mountain, dammit! I wouldn’t have come all this way for Suzaku! I came because I wanted t’help you — I wasn’t abandoning the mountain or anythin’ like that!”

“I know, you idiot.” Hakurou was amused. “But listen. While you’re away, there’s uncertainty as to what’s to be done. A lot of things have happened — trade is down, people are edgy, an’ toll has been inconsistent too. More than that, in your absence, Kouji has the tessen. But he can’t fire it. An’ there’s one other who can.”

“One… other?”

“Someone who seems to have overheard the spell when I was teaching it to you.”

Genrou’s eyes widened, and Hakurou nodded.

“If you really want t’help Reikaku-zan, Genrou, you have to go back.” He said soberly. “I came here tonight just to tell you that. You are the Kashira, now. And the mountain needs its leader.”

With that the apparition faded and blurred, and Genrou let out an exclamation, reaching out a hand as if to try and grab his leader back. His fingers passed straight through the other’s arm, however, and at the expression on his face, Hakurou offered him a grin.

“I have faith in you.” He said, his words becoming more blurred and resonant as his form disintegrated into light. “S’why I chose you. Suzaku or otherwise, Genrou — I know you’ll always make the right choice.”

With that he was gone, and as the darkness returned to the cavern, Genrou dropped down onto his knees, his heart lurching in his chest as he registered what had just happened.

For a moment he told himself desperately that it had just been a dream, but deep down inside he knew it had not.

His Kashira had lost his fight with his fever, relinquishing his grip on life even as Genrou had struggled to find his leader a cure. He would never speak to the man again — never spend time training

under him, or learning tricks about the mountain life. The man who had been like a brother and a father to him had suddenly disappeared in a haze of light, and as the pain of it seeped through him, the tears began to flow unchecked down his cheeks.

"I'm sorry, Kashira." He murmured. "I let you down."

He buried his head in his hands, allowing his feelings to rule his senses for a while. Then, as he remembered the apparition's words, he gathered his wits, getting resolutely to his feet once more.

"I'll go back." He decided. "I'll go back an' sort out whatever it is goin' down back home. I promised him, after all. An' he came all the way out here t'speak to me, dead an' all. He wanted me to go back, so I'll go. It's the last thing I can do for him, in any case. Go back an' keep my promise to be Reikaku-zan's next Kashira."

He reached up to dash his tears away, raising his gaze to the cave ceiling.

"I won't let you down, Kashira." He said fiercely, clenching his fists. "Reikaku-zan an' me, we'll be fine, you'll see. Wherever you are, watch us, okay? I'll make sure the mountain is as strong as ever — you don't gotta worry even a little bit. I'll remember everything you taught me, an' I'll do my best to follow what you began. Suzaku'll just have to forget about me. I'm Genrou of Reikaku-zan an' I'm coming home!"

"Are you really going to leave the palace?"

Nuriko stood in the doorway of Tamahome's chamber, eying him curiously as he watched his fellow Seishi tossing belongings haphazardly into a bundle on his bed. "Tamahome, are you completely stupid? What if Miaka comes back tomorrow? What use will you be, if you've disappeared into the blue? You really make no sense."

"I have to earn money." Tamahome paused to meet his companion's gaze, a frown creasing his brow. "I don't expect someone who comes from a rich background like you to understand that, Nuriko, but it's still the truth of it. I can't just sit around here and wait forever. I have things I need to do, and I need to be working."

"Money again." Nuriko snorted. "You really have an obsession in that department, you know. Why do you need money? You're living in the palace, for Suzaku's sake. You have everything you could ever need here. What could be so important that you'd want to leave this

and go out into the unknown?"

"Things you wouldn't understand." Tamahome said briefly, and Nuriko grimaced, twisting his handsome features into a grotesque mask.

"That's not good enough." He said frankly, grabbing his companion by the shoulders and forcibly holding him up against the wall as he fixed his dark gaze on Tamahome's defiant one. "There must be a reason… you can't really be so shallow as to value money more than you value Miaka and the reason we're all here?"

"Miaka's nothing to do with it." Tamahome said heavily, struggling to release himself from the stronger Seishi's grip. "Put me down, Nuriko — I have my reasons, that's all."

"Then spit them out, because you don't make any sense." Nuriko was unmoved. "Why are you leaving, all of a sudden? Because you got jumped in the forest? Idiot. Don't you think that the palace is the safes place for someone to be, if they're being targeted? You're the oni-shounen, after all. People know all about you, even if they don't know about the rest of us quite so clearly. You're no safer out there on you own, away from Hotohori-sama's guards. Maybe you do have a hero complex, but even so…"

"It's nothing to do with that!" At last, Tamahome wriggled free, glaring at his companion. "I told you, you wouldn't understand. You come from a wealthy background in the Textile Quarter — I've seen the emporium for myself these last few days, and I know how friggin' huge it is. It's not the same for me. There's no work in Eiyou, and whether you understand or not, I came here to get a job. If Miaka ain't here, an' I ain't needed as a Seishi, then there's no point me sitting around doing nothing. I'm not that kind of person, after all. I need to be doing things. And I need to be earning money — so that's how it is."

"Tamahome!"

"Miaka isn't coming back." Tamahome said frankly. "At least, not yet. Maybe not for years, at this rate. Did you stop and think of that?"

"Of course, you moron." Nuriko was impatient. "All the time. She's a little idiot, so whether she remembers where we are or how to get to us is anyone's guess. But I have to have faith — isn't that what people keep telling me? I have to believe in Miaka and trust in her. Isn't that what you wanted me to do? And now you're taking off? Some inspiration that is."

“It doesn’t matter what you say.” Tamahome said tiredly. “I’m going, Nuriko, and I’m going tonight. There are villages to the East who are looking for people to protect them and their livestock, and I figure that fighting is something I can at least do. If Miaka comes back, well, then things will be different. But right now we don’t know when that will be. And till that time, we’re not Shichi Seishi. We’re just people, waiting for someone who never comes.”

His eyes narrowed.

“There may be a war on the horizon.” He added. “But right now I’m more focused on doing what I originally came to Eiyou to do in the first place.”

Nuriko sighed, tut-tutting under his breath.

“You really are a hopeless case.” He said resignedly, taking a step back. “What Miaka sees in you I’ve no idea, you know. You really are pathetic.”

“Maybe. Maybe not.” Tamahome shrugged, pulling his meagre belongings together and tying the bundle tightly. “But it doesn’t change anything. Tell his Highness that it was something I had to do, and that if Miaka comes back, so will I. However long that might take.”

“All right.” Nuriko sighed. “Though you should tell him yourself, you know.”

“I don’t see why. He probably won’t mind half as much as you seem to, if I leave.” Tamahome said simply.

“I mind.” Nuriko pouted. “I’ll miss you, of course. Who am I supposed to pick on, till Miaka gets back?”

“You mean you want me here to distract Miaka from Hotohori-sama when she finally does return.” Tamahome returned smartly, and Nuriko pulled a face.

“That too.” He acknowledged. “But even so, it’s beside the point.”

“Whatever the point is, let’s leave it there. I don’t want to waste half my day trying to untangle your reasoning.” Tamahome hauled the bundle up onto his shoulder. “Later, Nuriko. If Miaka comes back, I’m trusting her to you. All right?”

“Well, at least that way she’s likely to stay alive.” Was Nuriko’s sardonic response. “Fine. Whatever. If she comes back, I’ll also tell her you ran off into the wilderness to earn money, shall I?”

For a moment Tamahome faltered, a pained look crossing his young features. Then his resolve hardened, and he nodded.

“If you like, since it’s the truth.” He said evenly. “Tell her that. I haven’t the time to waste arguing about it, Nuriko. I’ll see you if and when Miaka returns to Kounan… till then, I’ve got things to do and they don’t concern you.”

With that he was gone, and Nuriko sighed, slowly shaking his head as he moved to close the swinging door.

“You idiot, Tamahome.” He muttered. “What if Suzaku no Miko does come back tomorrow? What then? This is about more than your coin tally, you know. This is about saving a kingdom.”

He bit his lip.

“And maybe, also, saving a young girl’s heart.”

The die had been cast.

In the darkness of the palace chamber, Nakago stood at the window, gazing out at the stars that dotted the Eastern sky. It was a clear night, he reflected absently. Clear enough for him to see the constellations of Seiryuu in all their glory, and somehow this fact amused him. He already knew, after all, where most of his brethren were hidden. In a short space of time, he was sure, he could summon them to arms and manipulate them as his blessed, star-struck arsenal in his complicated schemes for revenge. In the end, people would die — many people, if he had his way. And even if it meant bringing Kounan to its knees in the meantime, Nakago would have his revenge.

He turned, moving softly across the chamber to where a young girl slept, partly highlighted by the silver glow of the moon.

For a moment Nakago gazed at her, a mixture of derision and anticipation flooding his normally deadened senses. She was just a girl — a child in may ways. But through her ran the blood of the dragon God, and even from this distance, Nakago could feel it prickling and dancing in her aura.

She did not know, yet, how she would help him achieve his goals. For the time being, she simply looked to him for help and guidance in this dark world, and Nakago had seen no reason not to give it.

After all, this was just the first step in his plan.

He reached down to gently touch the girl’s cheek, brushing her hair

aside as she murmured incoherently in her sleep. A cold, calculating smile touched his lips at her vulnerability.

He could kill her with a simple thought, yet this girl alone was the one who could bring all his plans to fruition. Through this girl he had already learnt far more than he had done through his many spies in Kounan. And now, as the South continued to grow uneasy, he knew it was almost time to strike.

From hereon in, the war would truly begin.

Kirameki tamae, sadame no hoshi yo!
Wa ga aisu-beki mono-tachi no
Kanashimu sugata dake ga kigakari
Kono mune no uchi ni tsugete kure

Sore wa ichido no wakare
Soshite towa no saikai
Watashi wa iru
Tomo ni ikita kioku no naka ni
Itsumo…

((Star of fate, please shine!
Make the sad figures of those I should love
The only concern ringing
Deep within this heart

This is only one parting
As we'll meet forever
I'm here, living together with you
Inside your memories
Always…))

(Sadame no Hoshi, Hotohori, FY Soundtrack)

:Sankagetsu Den: -Owari-: